

Charlotte Perkins Gilman



Portrait of Charlotte Perkins Stetson [Gilman] by Charles Walter Stetson, 1891. Courtesy of Walter Stetson Chamberlin.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

New Texts, New Contexts



EDITED BY

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and

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS · COLUMBUS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Charlotte Perkins Gilman : new texts, new contexts / edited and with an introduction
by Jennifer S. Tuttle and Carol Farley Kessler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8142-1144-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8142-1144-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8142-9243-3 (cd)

1. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 1860–1935—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Feminism and literature—United States—History—19th century. 3. Feminism and literature—United States—History—20th century. 4. Women and literature—United States—History—19th century. 5. Women and literature—United States—History—20th century. I. Tuttle, Jennifer S., 1967– II. Kessler, Carol Farley, 1936–.

PS1744.G57Z617 2011

818'.409—dc22

2010024754

This book is available in the following editions:

Cloth (ISBN 978-08142-1144-1)

CD-ROM (ISBN 978-08142-9243-3)

Cover design by Larry Nozik.

Type set in Adobe Sabon.

Printed by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank the Maine Women Writers Collection and the University of New England (UNE) for hosting the conference “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Then & Now,” June 2006; their support, along with the co-sponsorship of the Charlotte Perkins Gilman Society and the rich intellectual contributions of the conference participants, provided the impetus for this volume. We are grateful for financial assistance provided by UNE’s Department of English and Language Studies. The Maine Women Writers Collection also gave a much appreciated subvention grant. We are indebted to the librarians who graciously and cheerfully helped us with inquiries and interlibrary loans: Roberta Gray, Cally Gurley, Gay Marks, and Laurie Mathes at the Abplanalp Library on the Portland Campus of UNE; Brenda Austin at the Ketchum Library on the UNE Biddeford Campus; Jean Sphar and Susan Ware at the John D. Vairo Library of Penn State Brandywine; and Diana Carey at the Schlesinger Library. Denise D. Knight also answered several queries from her personal library with astonishing promptness, and Cynthia J. Davis generously helped us to secure the frontispiece image. Special thanks go to Lisa M. Thomas for her quick and thorough editing. On behalf of ourselves and the volume contributors, we would like to express our gratitude to Walter Stetson Chamberlin and Linda Chamberlin; the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University; and the Women’s History Museum and Educational Center in San Diego, CA for granting us permission to quote from or to print unpublished sources in their holdings. Finally, we are grateful to the staff at The Ohio State University Press for their guidance and expertise—particularly Sandy Crooms, who offered unfailing enthusiasm, patience, and support—and to the Press’s anonymous readers, whose suggestions have markedly strengthened the volume.

Introduction

JENNIFER S. TUTTLE AND CAROL FARLEY KESSLER

A central concern for scholars of U.S. women's writing has been the recovery of lost or unread texts, a process well exemplified by recent work on Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* (26.2 [2009]), critics participating in a roundtable discussion assess the successes and failures of recovery during the past three decades or so. Recovering the writing of women, through scholarship and through modern editions, has been a central, even generative, component of many academic fields that have proliferated since the 1970s, not only literary criticism and women's history but also women's studies, cultural studies, and other cross-disciplinary areas of investigation. While a need for unearthing unknown authors and their texts remains, however, in the *Legacy* roundtable Sharon M. Harris suggests that today scholars are "in need of new recovery that asks us to interrogate our long-held (or even newly embraced) ideas about women writers in continually expanding ways" (Tuttle, "Legacy Roundtable" 229). Or, in the words of Lisa A. Long, "while the project [of recovery] remains the same, the terms of the conversation have changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years": we need to "trouble," rather than to "reify," our categories and objects of study (Tuttle, "Legacy" 230).

The field of Charlotte Perkins Gilman studies mirrors these larger trends. Indeed, more than ten years ago, at the Second International Charlotte Perkins Gilman Conference in 1997, Gary Scharnhorst issued a call for scholars to think differently about Gilman—to look beyond her most acces-

sible works and genres to recover her entire body of work, and to resist the temptation to idealize or sanitize it to fit their own agendas. “[A]s scholars,” he urged, “we should read all of her work we can find but read it critically, measuring her achievement on a historical template, situating her not only in our time but in her own” (“Historicizing” 72).

This volume takes up that challenge, representing a new groundswell of work in Gilman studies. During her lifetime, Gilman (1860–1935) was a world-famous writer, lecturer, and reformer, whose work was influential and widely celebrated; she has been called the “leading intellectual in the women’s movement in the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century” (Degler xiii). At her core a social philosopher, Gilman practiced her art and activism in an array of venues, and her interests were numerous, including women’s issues, labor, human rights, ethics, and social reform. As this volume’s second essay demonstrates, criticism on Gilman has undergone a number of transformations since Carl N. Degler and Elaine R. Hedges first began recovering Gilman’s work in 1966 and 1973, respectively. The initial celebration of the rich vein of writing and artwork left to us by this prolific woman was followed by more critical reconsiderations of her life and accomplishments, ultimately leaving scholars in the ambivalent position of documenting Gilman’s “mixed legacy” of ideas both abhorrent and visionary (Golden and Zangrando). And contending with this legacy has sparked a new phase of recovery work, which aims both to “read all of her work we can find” (as Scharnhorst put it) and to understand this work in new, more accurately historicized ways.

Certainly, we still need to recover previously unknown documents and information about Gilman. Such work brings recently discovered, unfamiliar, or otherwise obscure sources to the attention of Gilman scholars.¹ But beyond filling such obvious gaps, we need to attend to neglected parts of her oeuvre, to other “new texts”—works that we know exist, and are even in print, but that have not yet received adequate critical scrutiny. While a profusion of scholarship on Gilman has been published, until recently much of it has concerned a small number of her most popular prose works, such as “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), *Women and Economics* (1898), and *Herland* (1915). These were among the first of Gilman’s works to be recovered in the present era. This may be due in part simply to their effectiveness as texts: Gilman, writing always “with a purpose,” had mixed success as a rhetorician whose creative work was invariably didactic (*Living* 121). Yet such evaluative arguments having to do with aesthetic appeal are largely subjective, and they unfairly obscure the skill and subtlety with which much of her work was crafted: it may be neither accurate nor fair to say that these texts have been

studied most thoroughly because they are her best work. Another factor that obscured much of Gilman's other work for so long was its lack of availability. For example, most of her fiction appeared in *The Forerunner*, which had a very limited circulation, and her unpublished work remained in private hands and institutional repositories. Only *Herland* fortuitously caught the eye of a perceptive scholar working in an archival setting that happened to hold *The Forerunner*.

Beyond the issues of taste and availability, these works may have been the first to capture present-day critics' attention because they spoke directly and accessibly to some of the central issues of the U.S. women's movement's second wave. Though much of the theory espoused in *Women and Economics* was unquestionably dated in 1966 when Carl N. Degler issued a new edition, the volume's central argument about gender—that inequality between the sexes is due in large part to women's economic dependence upon men—still held true, and was a major problem concerning advocates for women's equality in the 1960s.² “The question that engaged the interest of Charlotte Gilman was how to achieve full equality for women in an industrial society. Today this concept is once again a live one,” wrote Degler (vii). He further argued that *Women and Economics* ought to be republished because it addressed issues central to such landmark works as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1951) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Gilman's text was important in its own time, Degler suggested, but it is also of value “for what it says . . . about and to women today” (vii–viii).

By the time “The Yellow Wall-Paper” was reissued by Elaine R. Hedges and the Feminist Press in 1973, the women's movement was gaining momentum. Gilman's story of a woman objectified by both marriage and medical science, and denied full bodily autonomy, spoke to many of feminists' immediate concerns, appearing, for example, the same year as the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision.³ “[W]ith the new growth of the feminist movement,” pronounced Hedges in her afterword to the volume, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman is being rediscovered”: here was a model of a woman's resilience in “one of America's foremost feminists” as well as a text “directly confront[ing] the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship” that so vexed women's rights advocates in the 1970s (37, 39).

Similarly, *Herland*—a utopian novel portraying an idealized all-woman society visited by three U.S. men, who learn to perceive women as equals—espoused sentiments popular with Second Wave activists.⁴ Published for the first time as a book in 1979 (having previously appeared serially in *The Forerunner*), and billed on its book jacket as “A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel” that is “as on target today as when it was written sixty-five years ago,” *Her-*

land emphasizes the “common humanity” of the sexes and critiques women’s lack of autonomy, which, Gilman argued, denied them the ability to reach their full potential (Lane, “Introduction” xi). Further summarizing Gilman’s argument, Ann J. Lane explains in her introduction to the novel, “Men, too, suffer from personalities distorted by their habits of dominance and power. A healthy social organism . . . therefore . . . requires the autonomy of women. That autonomy can be achieved only by women’s collective action” (xi). All of these are ideas that would have been compelling to readers riding the crest of the women’s movement, seeking empowering role models as well as validation from an earlier era of their still-pressing concerns.

Because these three works were some of the first to be brought to the attention of (and to be made available to) present-day scholars, they have had many decades in which to accumulate a large body of interpretation. In her essay in this volume (discussed in more detail below), Catherine J. Golden explores at greater length the appeal Gilman’s work held for this early generation of Second Wave feminist scholars. She also traces later phases of Gilman’s recovery by critics, explaining that it is only recently—and for reasons similarly tied to the social and intellectual currents that often dictate scholarly choices and preferences—that scholars have been prepared to look beyond what now seems to be a somewhat idealized and reductive vision of Gilman and her work. And the time is ripe for such further research, for critics to attend to “new texts” in Gilman studies—texts of which scholars may be aware but that have not yet fully captured their attention. At the time of this writing, a significant portion of Gilman’s work has been republished (or published posthumously for the first time), and the explosion of scholarly interest in her life and writing shows no sign of abating.⁵ All of Gilman’s novels and nearly all of her long nonfiction works have seen print in recent editions, some more than once.⁶ Numerous paperbound editions of Gilman’s short stories are now available.⁷ Gilman wrote in an impressive array of genres, producing eleven long nonfiction works,⁸ an autobiography, nine novels,⁹ nearly two hundred short stories, close to five hundred poems,¹⁰ seven years of her monthly magazine *The Forerunner*,¹¹ several plays and dialogues, as well as innumerable articles, lectures, suffrage songs, and other short pieces.¹² Critics have demonstrated their commitment to recovering—and republishing—Gilman’s lesser-known work, but they have only recently begun to focus on that work in their scholarship.

Equally important is the need to recover new *contexts* for Gilman: scholars doing archival and historical research have begun to answer the call for more nuanced and accurate understandings of her work and life. Drawing upon both biographical and textual evidence, for example, Barbara A. White

has called critics' attention to the largely overlooked "lesbian sensibility" in Gilman's work (205). Similarly fusing biographical and textual criticism, the 2004 volume *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts* (Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight, eds.) has undertaken this project specifically in terms of juxtaposing Gilman with other intellectuals of her time. Other recent research has considered Gilman's well-known work in new ways. For instance, Peter Betjemann has reconceived "The Yellow Wall-Paper" through the lens of visual culture, while Catherine J. Golden has interpreted the story within the mind travel tradition of Lewis Carroll.¹³ Some scholars have situated Gilman's work within broader social trends in ways that are newly illuminating, such as Michelle Ann Abate's analysis of *Herland* within a cultural history of tomboys and Michael A. Bryson's reading of the novel through the lens of ecological discourse.¹⁴ A significant extension of her humanist and social theory, Gilman's utopianism (most centrally, *Herland* with its sequel *With Her in Ourland*) has received considerable scholarly attention. While some critics contextualize her utopianism through new thematic lenses (as above), such others as Darby Lewes, Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten, Carol Farley Kessler, and Jean Jacques Weber illustrate how it overlaps with writing by utopian writers of her time, emerges from her lived experience, or includes readers within her utopian goals.¹⁵ Also illuminating Gilman's social philosophy are Beth Sutton-Ramspeck and Dana Seitler, among others, who have situated Gilman's work within her involvement with the eugenics movement.¹⁶ Gilman's activism has similarly been garnering more attention now than in the past, from more general readings that place her firmly in the tradition of American protest literature to long-overdue acknowledgment of her concern for international affairs, such as the Armenian genocide.¹⁷

One occasion for sharing and showcasing new work was the Fourth International Conference on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, held in 2006 at the University of New England in Maine. Titled "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Then and Now," the conference's stated aim was "to situate Gilman in her own time as well as to explore how she and her work are being recovered, assessed, and reassessed in ours."¹⁸ This focus elicited consideration of texts and contexts that were new to the field. The essays in this volume were originally presented as conference papers at this gathering in 2006. Since that time, the authors have developed and amplified their arguments, which situate Gilman historically and assess her mixed legacy; recover and focus needed attention on a richer variety of Gilman's writings; and reflect upon the ways her work is still relevant today. Several of the scholars included here attend to Gilman's less-studied novels and short works. Others consider

her use of drama and journalism, genres underrepresented in Gilman studies. Some revisit one of Gilman's best-known works of fiction—"The Yellow Wall-Paper"—bringing new contextual information and new ways of reading to bear on this familiar story. Still others read her work within a longer trajectory of women's writing, charting her influence and her significance within broad literary, feminist, and rhetorical traditions. The essays cover the entire span of Gilman's career, from her very first published stories, through the productive *Forerunner* period, to her last years of published and private writing.

The volume opens with two essays in which senior Gilman scholars assess, in quite different ways, the state of our knowledge about Gilman and her work, offering biographical and critical overviews. Bringing Gilman's public and private writing into conversation, Denise D. Knight uses a biographical approach to understand Gilman's sense of self in relation to the world around her, particularly with respect to Gilman's views of non-whites and immigrants. In "‘that pure New England stock’: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Construction of Identity," Knight reads Gilman's life-long allegiance to New England as a form of cultural imperialism. Gilman's belief in—and association with—Anglo hegemony in New England manifested itself in a variety of ways mentioned in this essay. She aligned herself with the Puritan work ethic, showed a preference for the New England literary tradition, and, in correspondence, emphasized her affinity with the region, whose people she deemed superior to those from other geographic locales. Over her long career, Gilman frequently complained that the influx of immigrants to the U.S. had caused what she called the "native [read: Anglo, New England] stock" to become endangered. In her autobiography she lamented the loss of the quintessential New England town, which she felt was undergoing gradual extinction as the result of an invasion by "foreigners." Over her long career, Gilman's xenophobia also surfaced in letters and in essays, where she pitted "aliens" against those born in the U.S. Through careful examination of Gilman's private correspondence, Knight traces the various sources of Gilman's nativism, including the role that Gilman's Beecher heritage played in her belief that New Englanders were superior both to immigrants and even to other American-born inhabitants. By citing Gilman's letters in conversation with an array of her other writings, Knight is able to situate Gilman more precisely for readers.

Complementing Knight's biographical analysis is Catherine J. Golden's "Looking Backward: Rereading Gilman in the Early Twenty-First Century." Golden reviews how critics over the past four decades have reassessed and reevaluated Gilman's body of work. Golden argues that critics seem to have

taken one of three stances toward her writing, each in keeping with its social and critical moment: the earliest treats her work almost completely positively; the next, more negatively; and the last with a mixed or more balanced perspective. The first group praises Gilman's vision for its support of gender equality, universal suffrage, professionalized housekeeping services, and community child care. The second group, discontented with Gilman, stresses problematic elements in Gilman's thought, such as her racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. The final group, benefiting from the work of previous scholars, attempts to balance Gilman's positive and negative features, assessing simultaneously both the prejudice and the promise of her body of work. Although scholars who unreservedly admired Gilman dominated the 1970s and 80s, she still received praise after the second group of the mid-to-late 1980s challenged this celebratory evaluation. The final group of scholars, emerging in the mid-1990s and still increasing in number, responds to and balances views of critics who are either discontented with or enamored of her work. To illustrate how Gilman's reactionary insensitivity becomes entangled with her forward-thinking feminism, both being part of her "mixed legacy," Golden concludes with a case study of Gilman's recently published 1929 manuscript novel *Unpunished*, a detective tale with a focus on violence against women.

Building on the groundwork laid by Knight and Golden in their critical assessments of Gilman studies today, the remaining essays push the boundaries of current knowledge about Gilman and her work. The section of the volume titled "New Texts" features essays that explore some of Gilman's little-known writing, including short and long fiction, drama, and journalism. As scholars in Gilman studies move beyond "The Yellow Wall-Paper," they are delineating Gilman's aesthetic in their explorations of her other, lesser-known work, worthy of study but as yet still in need of further critical attention. Such writings need to be recovered because they expand and complicate our understanding of Gilman as a thinker and writer and they allow us to bring new combinations of texts into conversation with one another. For example, Gilman's essay "Masculine Literature" decries the androcentric tendency of literature in general in her time and calls for "fresh fields of fiction" (Knight, *A Study* 123), while "Coming Changes in Literature" sets out a range of new plots and themes for authors to attempt. She then proceeds in *The Forerunner* to follow her own advice as she offers innovations in plot structure and characterization and tries her hand at a dizzying array of genres. Reading more of what Gilman wrote also, quite simply, helps scholars to articulate more accurately her social philosophy, illuminating its applications, contradictions, and shortcomings. Exploring a wide range of

her work similarly enhances our understanding of her skill as a rhetorician. And it more thoroughly illustrates her contention that writing in all of its forms was a persuasive means of opening people's minds and effecting social change.

Giving overdue attention to Gilman's stylistics and short fiction, the first essay in this section, "The Torn Voice in 'The Giant Wistaria' and 'The Unnatural Mother,'" offers analysis of the complex literary voice that Gilman achieves in these two short stories. Author Jill Rudd focuses on the interplay between the narrative and character voices within these texts, a strategy that, she argues, leads to a more complicated, even contradictory, evaluation of their protagonists than readers might expect from Gilman. In "The Giant Wistaria" (1891) Gilman embeds a historical mystery tale within a contemporary narrative. Rudd explicates the ambivalence of Gilman's narrative voice in this violent early story of infanticide and a mother's death. In her reading of "An Unnatural Mother" (1895), Rudd contrasts Gilman's torn-voiced narrative with a less complex, contemporary story, "The Chief Operator" (1909) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps—both works concerning a mother-child relationship in which the mother risks and loses her life while her child survives, an orphan. Rudd's analysis of these short stories sheds new light on Gilman's use of the short story genre to accomplish her reformist goals, while also illuminating her rhetorical and personal ambivalence about those goals.

Though "The Giant Wistaria" and "An Unnatural Mother" were published in the 1890s when Gilman's star was rising, the majority of her short fiction, and of her novels, were published first in *The Forerunner* between 1909 and 1916. In 1909 Gilman still enjoyed the international renown she had earned upon the publication of *Women and Economics* over a decade before, and she was still in demand as a lecturer. Nonetheless, she was beginning to tire of editorial intrusions and to find it more difficult to place her work. "[I]f one writes to express important truths, needed yet unpopular, the market is necessarily limited," she explained—and so she launched her own journal, where she published her novels serially (Gilman, *Living* 304). Among those novels less considered by scholars is *Mag—Marjorie* (1912).¹⁹ In "An 'Absent Mother': Gilman, *Mag—Marjorie*, and the Politics of Maternal Responsibility," Charlotte J. Rich begins to rectify the neglect of this work. In it, Rich attests, Gilman grapples with the controversial issue of long-term maternal separation from a child for the purpose of "world work." The topic is relevant not only to Gilman's life but also to much of her other writing—from nonfiction such as *Concerning Children* to her idealization of an Over Mother in utopian *Herland*, as well as to much of her poetry. The

novel thus merits further consideration within her canon, especially in its dialogue with her more unequivocal praises of what she termed “the New Motherhood.” Furthermore, this novel has continued relevance in dramatizing both the premise of her approach to childcare—that a good mother is, in fact, one who must often be absent in the service of “world work”—and the often-negative popular response to it in her own era. In introducing complicated choices about mothering in *Mag—Marjorie*, if not fully exploring their consequences, Gilman raises questions about the politics of maternal responsibility that are still being debated today.

Also considering *Mag—Marjorie*, Frederick Wegener explicates Gilman’s skill in manipulating genre in “Turning ‘The Balsam Fir’ into *Mag—Marjorie*: Generic Transposition in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Imaginative Economy.” Although Gilman’s short stories, novels, and verse continue to be reconsidered, her imaginative writings have seldom received the kind of aesthetically oriented critical attention that focuses in a sustained way on properties like style, form, and technique. Wegener’s essay initiates a new direction in Gilman studies by exploring one of the occasions on which she moved between genres when re-conceptualizing her unpublished play, “The Balsam Fir,” as her 1912 *Bildungsroman*, *Mag—Marjorie*. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon has considered why an author might adapt work into an alternate genre: to reach a wider audience, to provide a more complex social or political critique, and to achieve a different aesthetic goal (see chapter 3). Charting the evolution of play into novel, Wegener’s essay demonstrates how a full-fledged coming-of-age story came to replace an episodic drama whose title, naming the play’s evocative central image, is changed to one that names the heroine and thereby calls attention to the transformation she undergoes. At the same time, the image of the balsam fir, elaborated much more fully in *Mag—Marjorie* as the novel’s chief recurring motif, ultimately serves as an objective correlative for its heroine’s tormented emotions. Such a motif constitutes an overlooked aspect of Gilman’s skills as an imaginative writer, while an examination of the process by which “The Balsam Fir” became a novel reveals a craftsmanship and formal awareness not often associated with Gilman’s work.

The year that Gilman serialized *Mag—Marjorie* in *The Forerunner*, she also engaged in an essay debate with Ida Tarbell (1857–1944) over women’s status: while Gilman was committed to pursuing reform through fiction, as a journalist she was similarly outspoken and prolific.²⁰ In “‘The Same Revulsion Against Them All’: Ida Tarbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Suffrage Dialogue,” Aleta Feinsod Cane discusses how two pro-women’s rights journalists represented opposite sides of the women’s suffrage debate

during the Progressive Era. Gilman, editor and publisher of *The Forerunner*, represented the pro-suffrage viewpoint, while Ida Tarbell, an editor of *The American Magazine*, took the opposite position. Tarbell, a quintessential “New Woman” herself, relied on the nineteenth century’s “True Womanhood” paradigm as a basis for her anti-suffrage articles. Gilman countered Tarbell’s six articles with three responses in *The Forerunner*, thereby creating a magazine-based conversation. Cane examines the magazine text content surrounding Tarbell’s and Gilman’s articles written during 1912 and reads the magazines as unified texts within the larger context of their historical moment. The essay situates the struggle over suffrage and highlights the diminution of Progressive Era vitality that made the anti-suffragists still more powerful.

Gilman’s commitment to reform continued throughout the remainder of her life, and her later writing reflects this sustained engagement with societal affairs. By the 1920s, however, her output as both a writer and a lecturer had slowed: she had difficulty finding the audience that had been so hungry for her work twenty years before. In part, she simply faced a generation gap, complaining to Alice Stone Blackwell in a 1930 letter, “These very young readers editors & critics have no use for minds over thirty!” (Gilman, *Selected Letters* 278). Beyond this, her Progressive Era social philosophy that had so moved readers and intellectuals in earlier years became less compelling near the end of the twentieth century’s second decade. It may also be that her pragmatic aesthetic paled in comparison with more stylistically adept contemporaries such as Edith Wharton.²¹ Though she incurred a number of disappointments during the 1920s, working in vain, for example, to publish both her autobiography and what she considered her masterpiece, *Social Ethics*, she did complete the occasional lecture tour, publish *His Religion and Hers* (1923) as well as many shorter works, and receive recognition for her accomplishments. Frustrated at the continued subordination of women despite working her entire life to alleviate it, and needing desperately to write something that would sell, Gilman lashed out at patriarchy in perhaps one of the few genres she had not yet tried: the murder mystery.

In “Doing It ‘man-fashion’: Gender Performance in Gilman’s *Unpunished*,” Jill Bergman examines Gilman’s little-discussed detective novel, which was completed in 1929 but not published until 1997.²² Through the lens of Judith Butler’s poststructuralist model of gender performance, Bergman argues that a substantial change occurred in Gilman’s perspective by 1929: the novel figures as a departure from Gilman’s oeuvre in that she resolves conflict not through social reform at the hands of an “überwoman,” as seen in her previous novels, but through the violent death of a patriarch.

In what could be seen as either a disappointing or a strategic compromise with her woman-centered life's work, Bergman argues, Gilman invokes a performative definition of gender, creating a character whose ability to inhabit both femininity and masculinity allows her to defeat the novel's antagonist. Even in her last novel, Gilman was constructing new ways to be human as she imagined potential efficacy in moving beyond stereotypical gender roles. In other ways, however, *Unpunished* is classic Gilman in its attention to the damaging effects of patriarchy on women and, by extension, society more generally.

Beyond attending to new texts to better flesh out our understanding of what Gilman actually wrote, authors in this volume also bring new contexts to bear on Gilman's best-known work of fiction: "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892). As Catherine Golden has noted in her recent sourcebook on the story, the "extensive critical discourse" on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" includes work from a wide range of critical angles, including "feminist, psychoanalytical, queer theory, Marxist, Derridean, Lacanian, new historicist, and sociological approaches as well as a combination of these" (*Yellow* 4).²³ Golden explains, "Critics have examined the diary format; first-person narration; discourse of diagnosis; themes of madness and regression versus emancipation and empowerment; word choice; symbolism; and the ambiguous ending" (2-3). Indeed, readers "may be as engaged in reading the wide-ranging criticism about the tale as the story itself" (3). Though the seemingly exhaustive critical treatment of the story leaves many readers with the impression that nothing new can be said about Gilman's masterpiece, the three essays included here provide fresh insights through situating "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in new and compelling contexts, interrogating some of the old frameworks for understanding the story by historicizing it differently.

In "‘there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me’: An Alternative Reading of Neurasthenia," Jennifer Lunden begins by reminding readers of the well-worn premise that Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in semi-autobiographical protest against the paternalistic rest cure she had experienced under the care of the eminent neurologist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. After his "cure," Gilman, determining that her own neurasthenia was a reaction to the patriarchal constrictions of domesticity, left her husband and young daughter behind in Rhode Island so that she might forge a life of her own choosing in California. Contemporary scholarship often supports Gilman's explanation for her illness, interpreting neurasthenia as a form of psychological resistance to gender roles and modernity. This essay asserts that early industry exacted also a biological toll on neurasthenics. Lunden explores subtle allusions in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" to a prevailing concern

of the era: arsenical wallpapers. By revealing the connections between arsenical wallpapers and neurasthenia, this paper challenges its audience to reconsider neurasthenia as not just a psychosocial malaise, but a *biopsychosocial* response to industrialization; it therefore provides a new reading of Gilman's gothic story as a critique of industrial capitalism and its by-products. The essay also links neurasthenia to its two contemporary corollaries, chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple chemical sensitivity. Lunden thereby expands our understanding of Gilman's activism to include the chemical environment, not heretofore considered to be among her concerns.

Sari Edelstein provides another fresh context for "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in "The Yellow Newspaper: Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' and Sensational Journalism." Her essay extends the work of Lawrence J. Oliver and Gary Scharnhorst, who examine the impact of yellow journalism on Gilman by focusing on Ambrose Bierce's verbal abuse of Gilman in the 1890s. Edelstein situates Gilman's canonical story within the context of her contemporary print marketplace. As a novelist, and as a magazine editor and contributor, Gilman certainly felt the impact of "yellow journalism." As Edelstein shows, the newly commercialized, exploitative press was already exerting a profound influence over Gilman and the reading public in the early 1890s when the story was written. In locating Gilman's story within this newspaper culture, Edelstein offers a new understanding of the material history of the feminist and racial discourses that have dominated Gilman scholarship. As Edelstein demonstrates, turn-of-the century tabloids created and circulated racial stereotypes just as they reduced women, including Gilman herself, to objects of scandal. While in 1909 Gilman founded *The Forerunner* as a direct response to the salaciousness of the yellow press, this essay argues that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is her first, and most complex, indictment of the journalism that vexed and misrepresented her throughout her career.

While Lunden and Edelstein historicize Gilman in new ways, Caroline Brown reads "The Yellow Wall-Paper" within a longer historical trajectory. In "The Madwoman's Other Sisters: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gloria Naylor, and the Re-inscription of Loss," Brown interprets Gloria Naylor's 1985 novel, *Linden Hills*, as revisioning "The Yellow Wall-Paper." While separated by time and the racial identities of their authors (identities that inform each woman's larger agenda) as well as by almost a century of elapsed time, both works examine middle-class heroines driven to madness by social systems and husbands unprepared to acknowledge either their emotional and intellectual complexity or their need for greater autonomy. However, rather than simply presenting passive victims, both Gilman and Naylor create vivid portraits of women complicit in their own marginalization, yet who

nonetheless manage figuratively to some extent to blank out patriarchal texts with their own. Brown illustrates how Naylor reverses Gilman's paradigm of the "madwoman in the attic," a white, nineteenth-century, Anglo-American model, by shifting her position to the basement, the figurative space assigned to African Americans in the larger American landscape and the literal space in which the novel's antagonist, Luther Nedeed, imprisons his wife. Brown then shows that these Anglo- and African American husbands hold similar attitudes toward their wives. In performing originally feminine rituals—maintaining private journals, cookbooks, and family albums—generations of women in the privileged black Nedeed family attempt to assert their individuality. Instead, these texts become, like that of the protagonist of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," a feminist record of growing disillusionment, madness, and eventual self-annihilation. Through these portrayals, Gilman and Naylor identify and theorize the traditional erasure that women have faced in history and literature as a result of their socioeconomic and emotional dependence, and thereby create powerful oppositional discourses that emerge from women's lived experience.

The final essay in this collection similarly situates Gilman within a broad historical frame and a long rhetorical tradition, simultaneously highlighting an important and little-recognized side of her. In "Feminist Humor and Charlotte Perkins Gilman," a later version of her keynote address at the Fourth International Gilman Conference (2006), Shelley Fisher Fishkin discusses an important aspect of Gilman's work very seldom acknowledged by critics: her use of humor as a rhetorical tool, humor often exemplified by her verse. Placing Gilman within an historical context of feminist humorists before, during, and after Gilman's time, Fishkin identifies three particular strategies apparent throughout Gilman's body of work as well as that of her contemporaries: illumination, impersonation, and inversion. Illumination "involves shining a light on women's lives, making the invisible more visible, breaking through myths and lies that are accepted as truths, and giving voice to truths that are not usually articulated" (Fishkin, "Feminist Humor" 224). Impersonation consists of ventriloquizing "the voice of the person who holds attitudes that you want your reader to reject" (234). And inversion is accomplished through imagining how men and women would feel if they found themselves in one another's "bodies and clothes and roles" (239). Through her ability not only to inject humor into her discussion of serious social issues but also to laugh at herself, Gilman was often able to change minds and thereby effect social change.

Aware of her own shortcomings—if not her blind spots—Gilman nevertheless believed, to her dying day, that she had something important to

say. Her career on the wane in the last years of her life, Gilman sought a biographer who would tell the story of what she called her “living,” in part to keep alive the ideals that she had advocated. She appealed to friend and playwright Zona Gale (1874–1938) to write the volume, which would be informed by Gilman’s incomplete autobiography written a decade before: “for the sake of the work, the scrappy, imperfect, desperately earnest work I have done,” she wrote to Gale in 1934, “I hope you’ll do this for me.” Gilman explained, “I feel that it would stir an interest in my other books, now all out of print” (*Selected Letters* 293). She wanted her work remembered: more than that, she felt it could still change the world for the better. While Gale did not ultimately write Gilman’s biography, she did write a foreword to Gilman’s autobiography, published posthumously in 1935. She began by noting that Gilman “has flamed like a torch, . . . her one message blazing from her spoken and written words, and from her living: ‘Life is growth’” (xxvii). But contrary to Gilman’s hopes, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* did not “stir an interest” in her previously published writings. Instead, she fell into obscurity for the next thirty-five years, her “desperately earnest work” languishing and remaining largely unrecognized through two-thirds of the twentieth century.

Though much of that work has now been recovered, this volume is designed, in part, “to stir [more] interest” in Gilman’s life and writing by giving due scholarly attention to some of the texts and contexts that have been neglected in Gilman studies. To return to Lisa A. Long and Sharon M. Harris, “the terms of the conversation have changed” since Gilman was first rediscovered in the 1960s; scholars are now more committed than ever to “interrogat[ing]” and “troubl[ing]” what we thought we knew about Gilman. The essays presented here offer readers, students, and scholars an increasingly accurate picture of what exactly Gilman thought and wrote—bringing new texts to their attention. Similarly, incorporating careful archival, biographical, and historical research, the authors represented in the present volume provide new contexts for understanding Gilman’s life and writings, situating her more precisely in her own time. Finally, this volume assesses Gilman’s place in a longer historical trajectory and within multiple rhetorical traditions, allowing a more textured and nuanced portrait of her work and its continued significance to us today. In a 1992 essay on “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Jean Kennard called for interpretive work that would illuminate the story’s meaning in terms that would “enrich our present” (qtd. in Thrailkill 154); Jane F. Thrailkill reads this as a call for scholarship that is “affectively attuned, as well as theoretically sound, and that is aesthetically oriented as well as historically situated” (154). Such is the body of critical

work we aim to present here. In publishing some of the new trends in Gilman scholarship, we also illustrate how Gilman has clearly reclaimed the audience she craved. Five years before her death, she revealingly summed up her own aims in a brief memo to herself, a note that speaks volumes (for better and for worse) about her driving philosophy, as well as her hope that her work would be remembered and have a lasting impact. Her ultimate goal, in short, was “The ‘landscape gardening’ of the world; conquest of vermin, conservation of resources, endless improvements. New energy & joy with each generation” (*Diaries* 2: 854).

NOTES

1. A striking case in point is Cynthia J. Davis’s recent rediscovery of the elusive letter Gilman sent to S. Weir Mitchell before taking his rest cure for her first nervous breakdown in 1887, in which she outlined “all the facts of the case” to aid him in his diagnosis (*Selected Letters* 45). See Davis’s biography, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, and Denise D. Knight, “‘All the Facts of the Case’: Gilman’s Lost Letter to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell,” *American Literary Realism* 37.3 (2005): 259–77.

2. Economic concerns related to gender equality were on many people’s minds in the early 1960s. Just three years before Degler’s new edition of *Women and Economics* was published, for instance, the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) issued a report advocating equal pay for comparable work, and Congress subsequently passed the Equal Pay Act (though it was woefully incomplete at the time). In frustration with the PCSW’s unwillingness to go far enough, some members of the Commission went on to found the National Organization for Women in 1966. For more discussion of the dynamic relationship between reissues of *Women and Economics* and the historical moments in which they have appeared, see Kimmel and Aronson vii–xiv and Tuttle, “*Women and Economics*.”

3. Elaine R. Hedges also notes this confluence of events in “‘Out at Last?’” 327–28. Tellingly, 1973 was also the year the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective published the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. In academia, the urgency to explore issues of women’s bodily self-determination in historical perspective similarly led scholars to break new ground during this time. In 1972 Carroll Smith-Rosenberg published her foundational essay “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America,” and 1973 saw the appearance of both Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* and Ann Douglas Wood’s “‘The Fashionable Diseases’: Women’s Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America.”

4. 1979 was a watershed year for the women’s movement, in which the Equal Rights Amendment failed to garner support in the requisite thirty-eight states and therefore was not ratified. The crisis of gender inequality loomed large: though legislation at the state level was beginning to change with respect to issues such as marital rape and discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, Gilman’s utopia—in which self-sufficient women,

free of patriarchal oppression, governed themselves—offered a liberating yet tantalizing fantasy, still far beyond the reach of readers. The same year in which Lane republished *Herland*, feminist literary theorists were working to articulate the predicament of women writers in patriarchy. Perhaps one of the most influential studies published that year was Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

5. Like her published work (more of which is listed below), Gilman's private writing has been similarly resuscitated: Knight has edited her diaries; Mary A. Hill has brought out both the diaries of Gilman's first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, and Gilman's letters to her second husband, George Houghton Gilman; and Knight and Jennifer S. Tuttle have edited a volume of Gilman's selected letters.

Complementing such publication of Gilman's public and private writing are four biographies, by Cynthia J. Davis, Hill, Ann J. Lane, and Gary Scharnhorst. Beyond his biography, Scharnhorst has provided scholars with an invaluable and nearly exhaustive bibliography.

Aside from the several book-length studies incorporating analysis of Gilman's work, and a substantial record of journal articles from many disciplinary perspectives, a number of edited collections exist: Meyering's volume was the first; those edited by Davis and Knight, Knight and Davis, Catherine J. Golden and Joanna Schneider Zangrando, Jill Rudd and Val Gough, and Gough and Rudd are the most recent. Several other collections concern "The Yellow Wall-Paper" alone (for mention of some of these, see note 23 below).

6. Even when a recent edition goes out of print, scholars often ensure that it is republished, and this is the case even for Gilman's lesser-known works, such as *His Religion and Hers* (1923), republished originally by Hyperion in 1976 (reissued in 1994), then again by AltaMira Press (with an introduction by Michael S. Kimmel) in 2003. There are also in print two Gilman readers, one on fiction edited by Ann J. Lane and the other on nonfiction by Larry Ceplair. In addition, several editions of Gilman's autobiography are available.

7. Knight's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction* provides an extended analysis of Gilman's short stories—ninety-seven pages—as well as about forty pages of Gilman's pronouncements on writing and stories, seven diverse critical essays, and a bibliography. Generally, however, beyond "The Yellow Wall-Paper," while a few of Gilman's short stories have begun to appear in scholarly analyses of her work, the greater part of her short fiction has received scant critical attention. Beer's volume, *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction* is a welcome exception. Though no complete published collection of Gilman's short stories exists, "*The Yellow Wall-Paper*" and *Selected Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, edited by Denise D. Knight, and *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories*, edited by Robert Shulman, are the most inclusive.

8. The nonfiction titles include both freestanding books and lengthy works serialized in *The Forerunner* but never published independently. In order of Gilman's writing them, they are the following: the early books, *Women and Economics* (1898) (Carl N. Degler [1966]); *Concerning Children* (1900) (Michael S. Kimmel [2002]); *The Home* (1903) (Michael S. Kimmel [2002]); and *Human Work* (1904) (Michael S. Kimmel and Mary M. Moynihan [2005]). *The Forerunner* serializations: "Our Androcentric Culture"

(1910), published as *The Man-Made World* (1911) (Mary A. Hill [2002]); “Our Brains and What Ails Them” (1912); “Humanness” (1913); *Social Ethics* (1914) (Michael R. Hill and Mary Jo Deegan [2004]); *The Dress of Women* (1915) (Michael R. Hill and Mary Jo Deegan [2002]); and “Growth and Combat” (1916). Finally is her last book, *His Religion and Hers* (1923) (Michael S. Kimmel [2003]).

9. These nine novels, listed in the order of Gilman’s writing them, include *What Diantha Did* (1910) (Charlotte J. Rich [2005]); *The Crux* (1911) (Jennifer S. Tuttle [2002] and Dana Seitler [2003]); *Moving the Mountain* (1911) (Minna Duskow [1999]); *Mag—Marjorie* (1912) and *Won Over* (1913) (Denise D. Knight [1999]); *Benigna Machiavelli* (1914) (Joan Drake [1994]); *Herland* (1915) (Ann J. Lane [1979] and Minna Duskow [1999]); *With Her in Ourland* (1916) (Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill [1997] and Minna Duskow [1999]); and *Unpunished* (1929) (Catherine J. Golden and Denise D. Knight [1997]).

10. A facsimile edition of her early poetry volume, *In This Our World* (1893), was published in 1974. Her later poetry has been published as well, and her poems appear in other multi-genre anthologies; nonetheless, Gilman’s substantial body of poetry remains a largely untapped vein of material for scholars. Exceptions include Catherine J. Golden’s “‘Written to Drive Nails With’: Recalling the Early Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman” in Rudd and Gough 243–66; Carol Farley Kessler’s “Brittle Jars and Bitter Jangles: Light Verse by Charlotte Perkins Gilman” in Meyering 133–43; Denise D. Knight’s “‘But O My Heart’: The Private Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman” in Rudd and Gough 267–84; and Gary Scharnhorst’s “Reconstructing *Here Also*: On the Later Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman” in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, edited by Joanne B. Karpinski (New York: Hall, 1992): 249–68. The Arno Press edition of *In This Our World* reprints the 1898 edition of the volume. Gilman’s later poetry is collected in *The Later Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, edited by Denise D. Knight. And Scharnhorst and Knight are currently preparing a new volume including *In This Our World* and Gilman’s uncollected poems.

11. Gilman published *The Forerunner* from November 1909 through December 1916. Though the periodical was republished by Greenwood Press in 1968, it is now again out of print. (The Greenwood Press reprint is, however, now available online through the Hathi Trust Digital Library at <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000544186>.) Janice J. Kirkland’s exhaustive *Forerunner* index, published in 1999, thus continues to be valuable to those interested in recovering work published in Gilman’s magazine.

12. Though various reports of Gilman’s lectures were published during her lifetime, a collection of her lectures themselves has yet to be published. Gilman did publish some of her suffrage songs in *Suffrage Songs and Verses* (New York: Charlton, 1911).

13. See Peter Betjemann’s “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Grammar of Ornament: Stylistic Tagging and the Politics of Figuration in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and ‘The Unexpected,’” *Word and Image* 24.4 (2008): 393–402, and Catherine J. Golden’s *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

14. See Michelle Ann Abate’s *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008) and Michael A. Bryson’s *Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

15. See Lewes for a general overview, and Donawerth and Kolmerten for articles on individual authors. Kessler's *Daring to Dream* includes Gilman's 1907 "A Woman's Utopia" and historicizes her three utopian novels by reprinting titles by suffragist Lillie Devereux Blake (1833–1913), author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911), and *The Masses* contributor Martha S. Bensley Bruère (1879–1953). Gilman's utopian writing, including novels, short fiction, and essays, is contextualized within her life in Kessler, *Charlotte*. How Gilman's utopian "text encourages the reader to be drawn into a particular ideology and perspective," which she "accomplishes very subtly, leaving the stylistic technique mostly below the level of readerly consciousness" (177), is analyzed in Weber. Gilman's utopian writing is compelling as a possible fictional obverse to her expository *Women and Economics*: the fiction thus functions as a thought experiment in the practice of her theories regarding gender and society.

16. See Beth Sutton-Ramspeck's *Raising the Dust: Literary Housekeeping in the Writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Grand, and Mary Ward* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004) and Dana Seitler's "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives," *American Quarterly* 55.1 (2003): 61–88.

17. See Zoe Trodd's *American Protest Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006) and Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). The latter cites Gilman's little-known article "International Duties" (*Armenia* 1.1 [Oct. 1904]: 10–14).

18. See Maine Women Writers Collection, "Past Academic Conferences," at <http://www.une.edu/mwwc/conferences/pastconferences.asp> (accessed 30 June 2009).

19. Though *Mag—Marjorie* has been described by one critic as "utterly banal" (Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 99), others, such as Rich and Wegener in this volume, have found it more compelling, despite its improbable, didactic plot. Thus far, other than a brief mention by Wegener in an earlier essay ("What a Comfort" 65–68), the only serious consideration it has received has been by Knight in her introduction to the 1999 reprint of the novel.

20. One of the most neglected areas in Gilman scholarship is her nonfiction writing for newspapers and magazines. While Gilman's journalism is sometimes cited in studies with other foci, the work rarely receives scholarly notice for its own sake. Exceptions include Baldwin; Cane's "Charlotte," "Heroine," and her essay in this volume; Fishkin; Ganobcsik-Williams; Heilmann; and Knight's "Charlotte Perkins Gilman." Though Gilman's own magazine, *The Forerunner*, is familiar to scholars and often cited, "her writings for *The Impress* and . . . the hundreds of daily columns she contributed to the *New York Tribune* syndicate" are little known and rarely discussed (Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 66).

21. For a discussion of Gilman's work alongside that of Wharton, see Beer.

22. Because *Unpunished* remained unpublished for so long, the scholarship on this novel is minimal, though critical interest in it seems slowly to be increasing. Aside from Golden and Knight's thorough analysis in their afterword to the novel's first published edition in 1997 and their article appearing in the journal *Clues* ("No Good"), Lane briefly discusses *Unpunished* in her introduction to *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (xxx–xxxiv), in which she excerpts the novel (169–77); see also Lillian S. Robinson's "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist

Propaganda," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.2 (1991): 273–85.

23. Golden's sourcebook offers the most recent overview of scholarship on the story: the volume's many excerpted secondary sources provide a critical history that is complemented by a section recommending further reading (157–62). For earlier reviews of scholarship on "The Yellow Wall-Paper," see, for example, Bauer 26–27; Erskine and Richards 7–23; Golden's "One Hundred Years"; and Hedges's "'Out at Last?'" In *Approaches to Teaching "The Yellow Wall-Paper"* and Herland, Knight and Davis also discuss critical studies most often recommended by contributors to that volume (see "Critical Studies" 10–11). Two textual studies by Dock and St. Jean have also appeared.

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BIOGRAPHICAL
&
CRITICAL OVERVIEWS

1

“that pure New England stock”

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman
and the Construction of Identity*

DENISE D. KNIGHT

In September 1922, American author and lecturer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) escaped what she characterized as the “hideous city” of New York with her second husband, Houghton, and relocated to the “dignity and beauty and peace” of Norwich Town, Connecticut, where she would spend the next twelve years. In contrast to the “nerve-wearing noise—the dirt—the ugliness, the steaming masses in the subway” of New York, her new home boasted “the loveliness of New England at its best” (Gilman, *Selected Letters* 151). “After New York it is like heaven,” Gilman noted in her memoir. “The people I meet, and mostly those I see in the neighborhood, are of native stock. . . . The long streets are lined with trees, New England fashion, and the majestic old houses stand back under their great elms” (*Living* 324–25). Indeed, in both her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, and in personal correspondence, Gilman emphasized repeatedly that New England was an integral part of her identity. Although later in life she lived in California and New York, Gilman still considered herself first and foremost a New Englander, a point she reiterated even as she planned her suicide at the age of seventy-five. Two months before her death, Gilman wrote a terse response to a correspondent who, in her view, sought to strip Gilman of her New England birthright by listing her as a “California woman” in a forthcoming publication: “I am not a California woman,” she

snapped. "I was born in Hartford, Conn., and . . . lived in Rhode Island for fifteen years. . . . I will not be falsely represented" (*Selected Letters* 301).¹

A significant aspect of Gilman's New England identity, both actual and symbolic, stemmed from her connection to her famous ancestors. A descendant of the renowned Beecher clan, Gilman was enormously proud of her "Beecher blood," though her family shared neither their status nor their wealth. Rather, it was the Beechers' record of public service that Gilman extolled in her autobiography (*Living* 3).² She also attributed her powerful oratorical skills to her distinguished lineage. To her then-adult daughter Katharine, who was named after both Catharine Beecher and her long-time friend, Kate Bucklin, Gilman remarked, "My speaking is pure heredity. The result of generations of ministers" (*Selected Letters* 191).³ That she found lecturing to be "pleasant work" was the result of her natural gift as a "Beecher preacher," she insisted. "I had plenty to say and the Beecher faculty for saying it" (*Living* 122).⁴ But it wasn't simply the Beecher cognomen that Gilman valued; rather she affirmed her belief in the emotional and intellectual superiority of New Englanders in a larger sense. To her lifelong friend Martha Luther Lane, Gilman wrote: "I don't know any better blood on earth than that pure New England stock." New Englanders, Gilman argued, are "so sane and steady and clever and true . . . and yet so open to all finer growth and influence" (*Selected Letters* 56). In fact, Gilman's allegiance to New England reflects a form of cultural imperialism, whereby she privileged the regional identity of the area by deeming it superior to other geographic locales. In her memoir, Gilman hailed the region not only for its distinction as a "seed-bed of progressive movements" (*Living* 3) but also for the homogeneous nature "in tastes and habits" of its "well-educated, well-read, and well-intentioned people" (*Living* 324–25). The rich cultural, literary, and political history of New England played a significant role in the creation of Gilman's identity. The region was aligned not only with the struggle for ecclesiastical and political independence, but it also boasted some of the nation's most prominent intellectual and literary figures, including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau. New England produced the most educated population in the nineteenth century, and it played a notable role in the industrial revolution. Gilman embraced the Puritan work ethic and maintained throughout her life that it was incumbent upon every human being to find his or her "special work in the world, and . . . [to] do it at all costs" (*Living* 43).

An even stronger affinity with her New England roots is revealed by the importance that Gilman placed on her lineage in a recently recovered letter to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, the famed neurologist who treated her for neurasthenia in 1887.⁵ Gilman wrote to the doctor, outlining the history

of her emotional collapse, the day before she traveled to Philadelphia to undergo the rest cure—a controversial treatment pioneered by Mitchell.⁶ Significantly, Gilman devoted a full third of her sixteen-page handwritten letter to a discussion of her ancestry and justified inclusion of her genealogy by citing New England physician/poet Oliver Wendell Holmes's no longer tenable argument that inherited attributes determine character from generation to generation.⁷ Although Gilman looked to her forebears for answers to her own history of despair, her letter to Mitchell also emphasized their finer qualities as New Englanders. Gilman's maternal grandfather, she explained to Mitchell, was Unitarian minister Henry Westcott (1796–1869), a descendant of Stukely Westcott (1592–1677), a planter and colonizer who, along with Roger Williams, was among the thirteen original proprietors of the Providence Plantations and the Colony of Rhode Island. Despite his tendency to be "nervous and fretful," Gilman characterized Westcott as "a sturdy New Englander" (*Selected Letters* 46). She also described her paternal grandfather, Thomas Clap Perkins (1798–1870), as belonging to "a family of New England divines," and her paternal grandmother, Mary Foote Beecher Perkins (1805–1900), as a member of the "very distinguished New England family; the Beechers" (*Selected Letters* 46).⁸ It is likely that by touting her illustrious pedigree, Gilman sought both to validate her intellectual credibility and to win Mitchell's respect. On the contrary, however, Gilman's familial history did nothing to secure preferential treatment, according to Gilman; Mitchell "scornfully" dismissed her account of her illness, because he "had a prejudice against the Beechers," having already treated "two women of [her] blood" (*Living* 95).⁹ Gilman's long struggle with melancholia, which resulted eventually in a nervous breakdown at the age of twenty-seven, caused her to variously criticize herself for her weakness and to congratulate herself for her strength. In an 1894 letter to her cousin Marian Parker Whitney, written when Gilman was thirty-three, she confided, "At times I don't do as well as a person of my 'parts' might be expected to, but at other times to do anything at all becomes . . . heroic" (*Selected Letters* 66). The reference to Gilman's "parts," which she emphasizes by enclosing the word in quotation marks, is both an acknowledgment of her Beecher heritage and a nod to her geographic roots in New England.

Gilman, of course, eventually recovered her health and went on to have a long and productive literary career. She also amassed a long list of publications during her lifetime. Notably, however, when we examine her early works—those that she wrote before she emerged as "one of the leading intellectuals of the women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic" (Degler xix), according to historian Carl N. Degler—Gilman's clear preference for

publishing in New England journals and magazines reflected her desire to establish herself as a New England writer.

Gilman's first published poem, for example, written when she was nineteen, appeared in *The New England Journal of Education*.¹⁰ Several other early verses appeared in *The Woman's Journal*, a Boston-based publication edited by Alice Stone Blackwell, to which Gilman later contributed a weekly column. Another early poem, "On the Pawtuxet," an ode to the historic Pawtuxet River in Rhode Island, appeared in 1886 in the *Providence Journal*. Gilman also published early poems in a host of Boston-based papers: the *Boston Budget*, the *Boston Sunday Herald*, the *Boston New Nation*, and the *Boston Evening Traveller*.¹¹ Significantly, too, her most famous story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," was first published in *New England Magazine* in 1892 and later reissued as a chapbook by the Boston publishing house, Small, Maynard & Co. Gilman also chose New England-based journals for two of her other early stories: "The Giant Wistaria" (1891) appeared in *New England Magazine*, and "The Rocking-Chair" (1893) was published by *Worthington's Illustrated*, a subsidiary of A. D. Worthington & Co., located in Gilman's birthplace of Hartford, Connecticut. Also noteworthy is a 1930 letter to Alice Locke Park (1861–1961), a California suffragist and correspondent for the *Woman's Journal*, in which Gilman remarked that her internationally acclaimed treatise, *Women and Economics* (1898), was written "in New England, in seventeen days, while visiting about among friends" (Gilman, Letter to Alice Locke Park). While she doesn't expressly say so, by noting that the work was written "in New England" while she was "visiting . . . among friends," Gilman implies that the intellectual culture of the region was so invigorating that she was able to produce a draft of the book in just two and a half weeks.

The fact that Gilman had a predilection for New England publications early in her career is not surprising, given her tenacious nativism and her belief that both her birthright and her birthplace rendered her superior not only to members of other races but also to persons born and raised in other geographic regions. Her belief in—and association with—the hegemony in New England manifested itself in a variety of ways. She not only befriended students at both Harvard and Brown University, but she also showed an appreciation for the rich New England literary tradition from an early age. She became familiar with the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne—arguably New England's greatest writer—and, at the age of sixteen, attended the opening-night theatrical performance of *The Scarlet Letter*, produced at the Boston Theatre, which also had in its audience such distinguished patrons as William Dean Howells, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Long-

fellow (Scharnhorst, *Critical* xxv). Gilman also spent part of her 1882 vacation on Martha's Vineyard reading Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* (*Diaries* 1:140). The following year, she received a volume of Hawthorne's fiction as a Christmas present (242) and later characterized the author as a "great and deep" thinker whose work was "honored as one of the distinctive glories of American literature" (Gilman, "Studies" 4).

Hawthorne was not the only New England writer to whom Gilman was drawn, however. At the age of nineteen, she attended a party at Elmwood, the James Russell Lowell estate in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an event also attended by Longfellow (Gilman, *Diaries* 1:21). When she received a copy of the Cambridge edition of Longfellow's works as a wedding present in 1884, Gilman remarked in her diary that the volume made her feel "rich" (275). She also enjoyed reading Sarah Pratt McLean's regional novel, *Cape Cod Folks* (1881), a story about a teacher residing in a New England coastal town. Moreover, her diary reports that she read at least five novels by Massachusetts native Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.¹² And, when she was editor of the *Impress*, a small literary weekly that she managed briefly in San Francisco in 1894–95, Gilman inaugurated a "Studies in Style" series, which featured imitations of writings by a number of prominent authors, including not only Hawthorne, but also New England writers Louisa May Alcott, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Gilman's uncle Edward Everett Hale.¹³

Although Gilman consistently aligned herself with New England, to which she fled "with the delight of a returned exile" (*Living* 325) after living in New York for twenty-two years with "its swarms of jostling aliens," she nevertheless found the fresh air of California, where she resided for several years, to be both invigorating and therapeutic (*Selected Letters* 228).¹⁴ In fact, though Gilman later denounced California, she returned there from Connecticut to die after the sudden death in 1934 of her second husband, George Houghton Gilman. Despite the allure of the climate, however, and the unmatched beauty of the region, Gilman carried on a love-hate relationship with the Golden State for much of her adult life. The east coast/west coast binary is particularly noteworthy when we consider Gilman's New England roots. Although she identified herself with New Englanders and venerated what she believed to be their intellectual superiority, she conceded in her memoir that it was in California that her "professional 'living'" began in 1888 (*Living* 107). It was to California, in fact, that Gilman retreated after separating from her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, who initially remained in Providence, Rhode Island.¹⁵ Gilman romanticized the California landscape and raved about its "richness of color, profusion of flowers," and "fruit and foliage" (*Living* 107). Her memoir alludes to "tall oleanders [that]

stood pink against the sky,” the “lemon verbena” that graced “the border by the front path,” and the “steady peace” of the California climate (Gilman, *Living* 107). In a letter to Martha Luther Lane, Gilman gushed about “the great blue periwinkles” that surrounded her piazza, “the roses” that bloomed “by the hundreds,” the fragrant “orange blossoms” that made living in California “a dreamland,” and the delightful presence of “mockingbirds and moonlight” (*Selected Letters* 58).

Yet all was not rosy during Gilman’s years in California during the early 1890s. She nursed her mother, who joined her in Oakland, through the terminal illness that would claim her life in early 1893. She was publicly ridiculed as a result of her 1894 divorce from Charles Walter Stetson—an act that was considered at the time both reckless and defiant; she also endured a messy split from her romantic love interest, Adeline Knapp, a reporter for the San Francisco *Call*; and she witnessed the demise of a weekly paper that she managed for five months, the *Impress*, which became a casualty of the various scandals in which she found herself embroiled.¹⁶ It was also in California that Gilman made the difficult decision to send Katharine back east to live with Stetson and his new wife, Gilman’s lifelong friend Grace Ellery Channing. That decision was a defining moment in her life and a choice that she vigorously defended years later in her autobiography. Moreover, Gilman—along with other members of the Pacific Coast Women’s Press Association—endured vicious attacks in the *San Francisco Examiner* from California journalist/writer Ambrose Bierce. While Bierce dismissed women writers in general as “moral idiots” in his 4 October 1891 “Prattle” column, Gilman, in particular, became a favorite “target of his taunts.”¹⁷ Bierce published caustic remarks about Gilman’s writing, her sexuality, and her divorce from Stetson. Her experiences in California left her feeling so embittered that she determined to return east. In part it was a symbolic attempt to reclaim the regional New England identity—and its historic association with high culture and good “breeding”—that caused Gilman to head back: “I had put in five years of most earnest work [in California], with voice and pen, and registered complete failure,” she noted in her memoir, but once “the train rolled eastward . . . [t]he sense of hope and power rose up afresh” (*Living* 180, 176).

Although Gilman sought to sever her ties to California altogether, it was not to be. When Walter Stetson relocated to Pasadena with his new wife and daughter Katharine in December 1894, Gilman was forced to revisit—both literally and figuratively—the Golden State. Unlike his former wife, Stetson clearly preferred Pasadena to Providence: “I cannot understand how anybody who has been in Southern California . . . can prefer New England to it,” he mused (qtd. in Eldredge 71).

Shortly before Katharine's twelfth birthday, Gilman wrote to her daughter from New York. Although she had been driven from California by scandal, she tried to put the best spin on an awkward situation. "I think of you . . . picking flowers," she wrote. "[Living in California] will be a deep sweet background of joy to you always, as my New England country life was to me." At the same time, however, Gilman remarked that her "New England country life," which she had enjoyed as a child, had enabled her to spend "lots of time in the woods . . . climbing the tall soft-boughed pine trees and swinging in their tops, wading in brooks, [and] swimming in the little river" (*Selected Letters* 133). And while the focus in this letter shifts away from the intellectual climate of New England, Gilman nevertheless romanticized the region in the construction of her identity. Specifically, the description focuses on the independence that she fostered, particularly when she was blissfully swinging in treetops. While New England as a conceptual space held sway in Gilman's imagination, it was Maine—the Pine Tree state—in particular that played a crucial role in the formation of Gilman's identity.

Gilman's introduction to Maine came on the eve of her twenty-second birthday in 1882 when, at the invitation of her Providence friend, Kate Bucklin, she traveled for the first time to Ogunquit, in the southeast corner of the state. A resort community even then, Ogunquit boasted majestic cliffs overlooking a rocky shoreline. Gilman was immediately captivated by its rugged beauty and spent long, lazy days relaxing, sketching, collecting flowers, watching sunsets, and reading works by New England writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell. Her last documented trip to Maine occurred some forty-three years later, in August 1925, when her friend Alexander Abbott, a "nice liberal minister," invited her and Houghton Gilman to join him and Mrs. Abbott in Ogunquit (*Selected Letters* 169). Over the years, Gilman visited or traveled through several areas of Maine: Moosehead Lake, Bangor, Upper Wilson Pond, and Green Acre on the Piscataqua River in Eliot.

Because she identified so strongly with the culture and intellect of New England, the allure of Maine was magical. In part, Gilman was drawn by its therapeutic qualities—the fresh air and the primitive power of the roaring sea. But her early visits in particular, especially in the summers of 1882 and 1883, also provided Gilman with a rare taste of freedom—freedom from the ever and over-watchful eye of her mother, Mary Perkins; freedom to pass lazy hours dozing in a hammock; freedom to sleep outdoors, if she were so inclined; and the freedom to have time away from Stetson, her then-suitor, who stayed behind in Providence, allowing her to contemplate the thorny emotional entanglement in which she found herself ensnared. Yet like her

relationship with California, Gilman's connection to Maine was complex. It represented not only the opportunity for autonomy, but conversely, during a darker chapter in her life—in the months prior to her marriage to Stetson—it became an emblem of domestic oppression, when she worked for ten weeks as a governess for the Jackson family of Providence, much of which was spent in the Maine wilderness. Those ten weeks, in fact, afforded a preview of what marriage and motherhood might portend if Gilman were forced to surrender her independence in exchange for the shackles that she feared would come with domesticity.

Gilman's first trip to Maine, in July 1882, came just six months after she met Stetson. While the early months of their courtship were generally pleasant and Gilman was powerfully attracted to the handsome young artist, she was reluctant to enter a long-term relationship, expressing doubts about marriage both in her diaries and in various letters. When Bucklin extended the original one-week invitation to Ogunquit to two weeks, and then to three and a half, Gilman was overjoyed. Both the physical and psychological space that Maine provided allowed Gilman to assert her independence—a crucial aspect of the identity that she had been consciously cultivating since her youth.¹⁸ On the Fourth of July, Gilman wrote an untitled poem—a reflective piece—that seemed to mirror her ambivalence about marriage. Invoking a trio of metaphors—the rocks, the ocean, and the sky—Gilman explored the tension between her life as a self-sufficient woman and her fears that while marriage did, at times, seem inviting, the prospect of marital happiness, and the surrender of her carefully crafted work ethic, would come at a terrible cost.¹⁹ The last line of the poem in particular, “Even Heaven looks misty & grey,” is notable for its ominous depiction of “Heaven”—veiled by “misty” greyness—as a reflection of Gilman's prescience that marriage would bring not only despair but a forfeiture of the independence to which she so tenaciously clung. Her struggle seemed to be reflected in the extremes of nature that she witnessed on the Maine coast; on July 5th, she went out in a fierce nor'easter, simply to see the ocean “rage & foam,” and the next evening, she serenely “watch[ed] a gorgeous sunset” (*Diaries* 1:131). Clearly, Gilman was attuned to the vagaries in nature—particularly its dualities—that visited the Maine coast that summer. The extremes—stormy one moment and calm the next—served as an emotional barometer as she worked through her ambivalence about the prospect of marriage, finding it simultaneously enticing and terrifying.

Although she experienced occasional periods of despondency during her first visit to Maine, the trip was nevertheless therapeutic. Many mornings she arose before sunrise, sometimes as early as 3:30 or 4:00 A.M. On those

occasions, she took long, solitary walks, against the backdrop of the rising sun, to gather bouquets of New England wildflowers. But perhaps Gilman's attachment to Maine, and an essential component of her identification as a hardy and self-reliant New Englander, is best reflected by what her friends dubbed "Charlotte Perkins's Leap"—a deep, narrow chasm near Ogunquit across which she would jump. Gilman includes reference to "Charlotte Perkins's Leap" in her memoir, underscoring its importance in the conscious construction of her identity.²⁰ The "leap," in fact, becomes metaphorically significant when we look at the literal meaning of the word—a "springing free"—and the particular appeal that Maine held for Gilman.

Gilman left Maine "amidst general bewailment" (*Diaries* 1:134) that year, but in July 1883, she returned for a two-week vacation, again at the invitation of Kate Bucklin. She passed her time playing chess, reading, sketching, painting, napping on the rocks, and spending time with her friend, Conway Brown, a "handsome Harvard boy" (*Living* 50) who arrived in Ogunquit with his parents on the third of July, Gilman's twenty-third birthday. As she had the previous summer, Gilman engaged in activities upon which Mary Perkins would undoubtedly frown. On the Fourth of July, she deliberately braved a thunderstorm, simply for the experience of getting drenched; she also climbed on the boulders, adorned herself with wild roses, kicked up her heels and danced with friends, and slept outside. But the behavior that her mother would have found most objectionable occurred when Gilman took a walk with Brown on 9 July, during which he allowed her to "try [out] his [loaded] revolver" (*Diaries* 1:207). She also took time to comfort and counsel Brown, a bright but troubled youth, after he confided that he had often contemplated suicide, an act that just six months later he carried out with a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.

Gilman left Maine this time on 14 July and returned to Rhode Island. Two days later, she began a ten-week stint as a private governess to a young boy, Eddie Jackson. While historically the governess is more associated with Old England than with New, it was in fact one of the few vocations open to young middle-class women—presumably because it was considered both safe and "feminine"—and Gilman relished the opportunity for steady employment. She and her young charge seemed at first to hit it off and spent hours playing billiards, baseball, and battledore. She also tutored Eddie in reading, math, and drawing. Within two weeks, however, when she returned to Maine with the vacationing Jackson family, her patience with Eddie was wearing thin. She grumbled in her diary about the ineffectual parenting of Eddie's mother, who "says he must go to bed at 8, but lets him . . . sit up till almost nine!" (*Diaries* 1:214). By 9 September Gilman wanted out of the arrange-

ment, reporting in her journal that “Eddie [was] rather ruder than usual to me” and wondering whether she could “stand it all winter” (220).

While Gilman had come to associate trips to Maine with pleasure and autonomy, the liberties she had enjoyed in Ogunquit were supplanted by a sense of oppression and even dread. The dichotomy could not be more striking. When she was removed from the cult of domesticity, Gilman felt unfettered and free; when she was immersed in the domestic sphere, and particularly when she was engaged in child care, she felt shackled and suffocated. To Martha Luther Lane, Gilman announced that she planned to leave her position as governess as soon as possible. Although she had initially rejoiced at the opportunity to return to the Maine wilderness, within weeks it was clear that the Jacksons—exemplars of the *nouveau riche*—were not members of the cultural elite of New England, with whom Gilman identified as a consequence of her birthright. On the contrary, she found the Jacksons to be “highly obnoxious” and Eddie, in particular, to be “Selfish. Rude. Lazy. Dishonorable. [and] Weak” (*Selected Letters* 34). Among her complaints was that time spent with Eddie meant “very little time by [her] self,” which was, significantly, one of the same objections she would voice during her first marriage. Caring for Eddie, she argued, compromised the few opportunities for solitude that she did have.²¹ As she drolly remarked in her autobiography over forty years later, Eddie Jackson was an “atrocious little boy” upon whom she “had wasted ten weeks,” and she had “learned more about the servant question in that time than most of us” learn in a lifetime (*Living* 153, 69). Stated another way, Eddie challenged Gilman’s image of herself as a respectable and congenial figure. Certainly, as a descendant of the Beechers and possessing “the Beecher wit and gift of words” (6), Gilman felt that she deserved respect. Eddie, however, saw it differently. To Lane, she grouched, “The hard part of it is having to bend my will and do what [Eddie] likes all the time, wholly regardless of my own feelings. . . . [T]o [spend] all day and every day with a youth who has neither respect nor love for me is hard” (*Selected Letters* 34).

After she left her position as governess, another fourteen years would pass before Gilman again visited Maine. In August 1897, at the age of thirty-seven and just two years after her humiliating departure from California, Gilman left for Green Acre, a resort hotel in Eliot, Maine, that earned its name from New England poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who found inspiration in its beautiful setting overlooking the Piscataqua River.²² Gilman’s most vivid memory of the trip was the intellectual freedom that she enjoyed. Her talk on the theory of motherhood—a controversial subject, given her status as a noncustodial parent—began at 10:30 A.M. and concluded at 8 o’clock

in the evening. Rather than feeling exhausted at the end of the day, however, Gilman was energized: "I had a triumphant feeling of having at last had a chance to say all I wished to on that topic—for once" (*Living* 233). If her early sojourns in Maine had unshackled Gilman from the restraints imposed by the cult of domesticity and offered her a taste of independence that she rarely experienced, the 1897 trip offered a similar measure of freedom. Three days after her talk at Green Acre, in fact, she began to draft her most substantial—and arguably her most important—work, *Women and Economics*.²³

Gilman's final documented trip to Maine occurred in 1925, when she and Houghton accepted the Abbotts' invitation to join them on vacation in Maine. Gilman later reported to Katharine that she and Houghton had been chauffeured to Ogunquit in style in the Abbotts' "big Cadillac" (*Selected Letters* 170). Her autobiographical depiction of the trip, however, documents not only her pride in her New England heritage but also, regrettably, her growing xenophobia. She remarked in her autobiography that "no one with a sense of historical perspective can live in a New England town and not suffer to see its gradual extinction" as the result of an invasion by "foreigners" (*Living* 326, 330). Her privileging of Maine was likely a result of her belief that it was the least compromised of the New England states. "I could have hugged the gaunt New England farmers and fishermen," she wrote, because they exemplified what "my people looked like" before the influx of immigrants "outnumbered and swallowed" the "native stock" (316, 324). Over her long career, Gilman made other similar remarks in letters and in essays, consistently pitting those people whom she referred to as the "aliens" against the "native stock" and against New Englanders in particular, whom she insisted were superior both to immigrants and even to other American-born inhabitants. It was a conviction that she would take to her grave.

But seeing the New England farmers and fishermen wasn't Gilman's only motive for returning to Maine. Rather, in a letter to Katharine, Gilman, then sixty-five, wrote that Mrs. Abbott "knows [about] 'Charlotte Perkins'[s] Leap' up there, and I am curious to see if I can leap it now!" (*Selected Letters* 169). While we don't know whether she took the literal leap one last time, we can at least imagine that she was pleased and amused by Mrs. Abbott's challenge. In 1935, the year Gilman died, she lamented to her cousin Lyman Beecher Stowe that their distinguished lineage had become adulterated: "When I looked at that array of outsiders—adopteds [*sic*], marrieds [*sic*], and such; as well as diluted descendants—it seemed to me the Beecher stock was running rather thin! Our greatgrandfather [*sic*] was certainly a 'prepotent sire,'" she wrote. "[B]ut then he had a 'prepotent dam[e]' to help him; two perhaps—the second was good stock, too. Anyhow, they did their

work—and that keeps”²⁴ (*Selected Letters* 295). As she planned her suicide, she reiterated her philosophical belief about social contributions: “The one predominant duty is to find one’s work and do it,” she wrote at the conclusion of her autobiography (*Living* 335). Even at the end of her life, Gilman’s work ethic remained intact.

Less than four months before her death, a longtime friend, Elizabeth Beau Willcox, paid tribute to Gilman’s New England heritage: “It does seem to me that you have served your generation marvellously [*sic*], living up to your exceptional background and tradition as very few New Englanders have done. ‘Outstanding’—‘worthy’—‘a Great Leader,’ these terms come to my mind when I think of you” (Willcox). We can well imagine that Willcox’s words brought comfort to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who, until the very end, resolutely remained a New England woman.²⁵

NOTES

1. Daisy Bannerman Coats was a longtime California resident whose civic activities included work for the National Woman’s Party and the Historical Society of Southern California. Gilman admitted to Coats that she was “raging over” the “old grievance” of being labeled: “It is a pitifully small business, for a state to grab at tourists, visitors, temporary visitors, as its own—shall we call Robert Louis Stevenson ‘a Samoan man?’ ‘A Samoan author?’” (*Selected Letters* 301). I am grateful to Jennifer S. Tuttle, the first scholar to discuss Gilman’s love-hate relationship with California, for providing the text of this letter.

2. The Unitarian minister Theodore Parker once quipped that Lyman Beecher was “the father of more brains than any other man in America,” though several of Beecher’s descendants became embroiled in public controversy. Gilman took pride in having her preaching compared to the sermons of great uncle Henry Ward Beecher, who, despite extraordinary popularity, endured the humiliation of a protracted adultery trial. Great-aunt Catharine Beecher, founder of the Hartford Female Seminary, was condemned by many for her advocacy of “domestic femininity.” Another great-aunt, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was plagued by scandal as a result of her support of feminist Victoria Woodhull, who accused Henry Ward Beecher of infidelity. Even great aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe endured condemnation, primarily from Southern readers, who challenged her depiction of the brutalities of slavery in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

3. In another letter to Katharine, dated 14 February 1925, Gilman asks, “Do you remember hearing about an old friend of mine named Kate Bucklin—whom I whimsically included with your great great aunt . . . Catharine Beecher, in naming you?” (*Selected Letters* 167). It is significant, too, that Gilman used “Beecher” as Katharine’s middle name, a designation that Katharine chose to retain throughout her life.

4. Not only did Gilman acquire the Beecher penchant for preaching but also shared her ancestors’ belief in white superiority in general and in their own higher intelligence in particular, a fact that has been well documented by Gilman scholars. See, for example,

Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism."

5. Despite the fact that Gilman scholars had been searching for the Mitchell letter for years, it was, until recently, presumed to be either lost or destroyed. The original copy is in the Wisconsin Historical Society. The letter was acquired in July 1944, when it was donated by William L. Breese, husband of the late American writer Zona Gale (1874–1938). For additional information, see Knight, "'All the Facts of the Case.'"

6. Mitchell's promotion of the rest cure was based on his belief that the patient had reached a state of "cerebral exhaustion,—a condition in which the mental organs become more or less completely incapacitated for labor" (*Wear* par. 72). The remedy, he argued, was enforced bed rest where the patient was spared from physical exertion and deprived of intellectual stimulation. "Rest becomes for some women a rather bitter medicine, and they are glad enough to accept the order to rise and go about when the doctor issues [such] a mandate," Mitchell argued (*Fat* 42–43). After remaining in Mitchell's care for a month, Gilman was instructed to "live as domestic a life as possible," to limit her "intellectual life" to "two hours" per day, and to never again "touch pen, brush or pencil" (Gilman, *Living* 96). She subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown.

7. In his preface to the 1867 edition of *The Guardian Angel*, American author and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–94) argued that inherited attributes determine character from generation to generation:

The story which follows comes more nearly within the range of common experience. The successive development of inherited bodily aspects and habitudes is well known to all who have lived long enough to see families grow up under their own eyes. The same thing happens, but less obviously to common observation, in the mental and moral nature. There is something frightful in the way in which not only characteristic qualities, but particular manifestations of them, are repeated from generation to generation.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the theory was no longer considered credible.

8. Mary Foote Beecher Perkins was the daughter of the renowned Presbyterian minister, Lyman Beecher Stowe (1775–1863), and sister of author Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896).

9. In her biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, biographer Joan D. Hedrick identifies one of Gilman's relatives who underwent Mitchell's rest cure as Stowe's daughter Georgiana, who sought treatment from Mitchell in 1876 (396). Some Gilman scholars have suggested that the other Gilman relative was Catharine Beecher. While Beecher did suffer two breakdowns and railed against controversial medical treatments in *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1855), I have found nothing to corroborate the identity of Catharine Beecher as the other patient of Gilman's "blood" to be treated by Mitchell. Beecher did, however, undergo the "Water Cure," an alternative medical treatment that its proponents believed could purify and rejuvenate the body's physiology.

10. Titled "To D—G—," the twenty-line poem celebrated the common dandelion as "the luxury of [a] humble life" (31).

11. In addition to publishing verse and fiction in *The Woman's Journal* over the years, Gilman contributed a weekly column to the publication in 1904. For a virtually complete listing of Gilman's publications, see Gary Scharnhorst's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography*.

12. Gilman read several novels by Phelps (1844–1911), including *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *The Story of Avis* (1877), *An Old Maid's Paradise* (1879), *Dr. Zay* (1882), and *Beyond the Gates* (1883), which Gilman erroneously referred to as “Behind the Gates” in her diary entry of 23 July 1897.

13. Much later in life, shortly before her seventy-second birthday, Gilman still showed a predilection for New England fiction. To her lifelong friend Grace Ellery Channing, she wrote, “Have you read those two nice Cape Cod Murder stories, with ‘Asey Mayo’ in them? The last one is called “Death Lights a Candle,” I forget the other, and, alas! the author” (*Selected Letters* 111). *Death Lights a Candle* (1932) was one of several mysteries written by American author Phoebe Atwood Taylor (1909–1976) featuring the character of Asey Mayo.

14. The reference to “swarms of jostling aliens” is from a 1923 letter to Alice Stone Blackwell. The date of the Blackwell letter is the 19th; the month, however, is illegible.

15. Charles Walter Stetson followed Gilman to California in 1889 in a futile attempt at reconciliation.

16. Gilman’s relationship with Adeline Knapp has been well documented by biographers. See, for example, Hill. *The Impress* failed, according to Gilman’s friend Helen Campbell (1839–1918), an author, reformer, and home economist, because of Gilman’s reputation as a divorcée. “Nothing that Mrs. Stetson does can succeed” in California, Gilman was told, and “no self-respecting woman could have [*The Impress*] on her table” (*Living* 173).

17. See Scharnhorst and Oliver. Gilman also developed a lifelong antipathy toward another California resident, publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, whose newspapers sensationalized her 1894 divorce.

18. See, for example, chapters IV (“Building a Religion”) and VI (“Power and Glory”) of Gilman’s *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, where she expounds on the conscious creation of an independent spirit.

19. The full text of the untitled poem that was written in Maine on 4 July 1882 is as follows:

I sit at my ease & gaze on the seas
Three things before me lie;
The rock where I sit, the sea under it,
And the overarching sky.
The rock[']s iron brow is the life I have now;
Too hard for peaceful rest;
Too warm in the sun, too cold when there's none
Uncomfortable at best.
The wide ocean comes next; now quiet, now vex;
It wants me, to hold & to keep;
It looks pleasant & warm—but there might come a storm—
And the ocean is pathless & deep.
And above hangs the dome of our dear future home
To be ours if we work through the day:
But these rocks hide the sun, the azure is gone—
Even Heaven looks misty & grey.

The image of the rock represented Gilman's current life, which she described in the poem as both "uncomfortable" and "hard." The ocean, alternately "quiet" and "vext," represented the paradox of tranquility and storminess, further reflecting her fears about marriage; and the sky, like the ocean, was emblematic both of the promise of marriage, represented by the clear "azure" "dome" and, conversely, the potential for misery, as suggested by the elusiveness of blue skies. The allusion to the sky, however, also represents the literal heaven. Significantly, and consistent with Gilman's work ethic, the poem suggests that one's entrance into heaven is contingent upon the "work" one does on earth, a principle she feared she would compromise if she married. Gilman writes, "Above hangs the dome or our dear future home / To be ours *if* we work through the day" (emphasis added). This is an untitled poem that appears on 4 July 1882 (*Diaries* 1:131).

20. In her memoir, Gilman writes that "One deep, narrow chasm they named Charlotte Perkins's Leap, because I jumped across it. It was not really very wide, but looked dangerous enough if one was not clear-headed and sure-footed" (*Living* 49–50).

21. To Martha Luther Lane, Gilman wrote:

We had chartered one of these little steamers for the day and were fishing. At least the men were, and Eddie. . . . I was loafing about aboard . . . when Mrs. J[ackson] thoughtfully asked me if I wouldn't like to take the boat and go off by myself [for] a little while. There was a shady island close by; and I joyfully acquiesced. . . . But Master E[ddie] beheld [me], and wanted to go. His mother demurred, but I smothered my selfishness and let him go. Off I set, meaning to row around the island. . . . I was so glad to stretch my arms. Then he didn't want to go around the island so I came back. Then he proposed that I should row him over to the fishing place and he'd fish! . . . To give up not only my promised aloneness and shady trees, but the quiet haven of the steamboat where was shade and cleanliness, and row out there in that still heat, and sit, (which is hotter) in a dirty boat while he slaughtered fish under my eyes and expected me to sympathize, and all without need—I could not. I would not. I told him so, saying it was too hot, and that he could go with his father just as well. . . .

Said he, "Weren't you coming out here to row?" "Yes" said I. "Well then!" said he, and in words I do not just remember gave it as his opinion that a person who would go out to row in the heat and not be willing to sit still in it, was a fool! To which I said nothing. (He went back to the boat & I had nearly an hour on the island. And was happy there.) Now isn't that a lovely boy? (*Selected Letters* 35–36)

22. With the backing of Sarah Jane Farmer, the daughter of a prominent transcendentalist and philanthropist, Green Acre opened in 1890, as a center for the study of religions. Still in existence today, Green Acre focuses on the establishment of world peace, gender equality, racial unity, and spiritual transformation. During Gilman's 1897 visit, Dharmapala, a Buddhist from present-day Sri Lanka, was also in residence, where he participated in a forum devoted to a comparative study of religions. Gilman notes in her autobiography that she "remember[ed] him enthroned in a rocking-chair, surrounded by admiring women" (*Living* 232).

23. Gilman also returned briefly to Eliot, Maine, in 1907. In 1907 and 1908, Gilman corresponded with Elizabeth Lanier and Sidney Lanier, Jr., son of American poet Sidney Lanier, about the possibility of giving some lectures in or around Eliot. The Laniers had opened a camp there in 1908, which promoted the “art of living,” where guests studied nature, crafts, and music. In late July 1907, Gilman again traveled to Eliot, remarking in an extant letter to Sidney Lanier, “It was a big pleasure to be with you, and did me good—people working toward the light” (qtd. in Knight, “Gilman in Maine” 380).

24. In another letter to her acquaintance Mrs. Roantree, Gilman lamented the declining impact of the Beecher name: “There are fewer people every year who care anything about what used to be perhaps . . . [the] greatest name in America? (outside of politics!): Beecher” (Gilman, Letter to Mrs. Roantree).

25. Unlike her mother, whose remains were returned to Providence for burial, Gilman left instructions that her ashes be scattered in the Sierra Madre Mountains of California.

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Looking Backward

Rereading Gilman in the Early Twenty-First Century

CATHERINE J. GOLDEN

“Looking backward” to the political activism of second-wave feminism offers a way to review the enduring contributions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the early twenty-first century. Gilman might well approve of this approach given her appreciation of Edward Bellamy’s 1888 *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, a utopian romance that influenced parts of her best-known feminist utopian novel, *Herland* (1915).¹ In the later 1960s and 1970s, critics began to recognize the work of Gilman among other rediscovered and underrepresented women writers including Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Edith Wharton. The critical response to Gilman’s work over the last four decades naturally clusters into groupings or “periods.” I am using the notion of periodicity to analyze how scholars and critics over time have variously reassessed and reevaluated Gilman’s oeuvre.² Gilman criticism clusters into three periods—first, the “encomium period,” praising her vision for gender equality, suffrage, women and work, professionalized housekeeping services, and community child care; next, the “discontented period,” bringing to the fore Gilman’s repugnant racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia; and third, the “mixed legacy” period, examining concomitantly the prejudice and promise of her oeuvre. These three periods overlap chronologically and respond to each other: although the “encomium period” is most dominant in the 1970s and 80s, “encomium” readings continue to inform Gilman studies because of their inclusion in

books and collections still used in literature, American studies, and women's studies courses. "Discontented" critics in the mid- to late 1980s began to publish articles specifically challenging this celebratory criticism while it was still being written. The "mixed legacy" period, emerging in the mid-1990s and still ongoing, responds to and balances views of "encomium" and "discontented" critics.³ Gilman studies over the last few decades and criticism on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) in particular exemplify the trajectory of much feminist criticism on the work of U.S. women authors recovered alongside Gilman's in the 1970s.⁴

The attention Gilman received for "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in the 1970s and early 1980s recalls the kind of international cult status that her revered great-aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe enjoyed following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In 1966, Carl Degler helped focus renewed attention on Gilman's feminist treatise, *Women and Economics* (1898), the text that established Gilman's international reputation at the turn of the twentieth century. But most attention in this phase of scholarship focused on *Herland* and, especially, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." How do we account for this unconditional response to Gilman's work at the dawning of second-wave feminism?

In the 1970s, feminist victories in reproductive rights along with equal opportunity in employment and education and the rise of feminist criticism in the United States, France, and Britain led many scholars to read Gilman sympathetically, optimistically, and enthusiastically. In particular, French feminism—with its focus on language as a tool of patriarchal domination as well as the social construction of Woman as the quintessential "other" (associated with Simone de Beauvoir) and the notion of writing the body (linked to Julia Kristeva)—seemed a prime approach to illuminate the discourse of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the narrator's actions of creeping on all fours in endless circles in her nursery/prison.⁵ Feminist critics publishing on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" from 1973–81, whom we now refer to as pioneering scholars, include (among others) Elaine R. Hedges, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Jean Kennard, and Annette Kolodny. They read the narrator sympathetically and present her as a misunderstood, misdiagnosed woman attempting to free herself from the restrictions of her gendered world (encoded in the infamous wallpaper), even if they do not agree on the narrator's fate: Hedges ultimately pronounces the narrator "defeated" while Gilbert and Gubar celebrate her madness as a higher form of sanity. In 1973, Hedges heralded "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as "a small literary masterpiece" (37) in her "Afterword" to the Feminist Press edition that quickly became the press's paperback bestseller. Hedges highlights the sociological importance of the story, the politics of gender, and its biographical significance. On the other hand, Gilbert and Gubar,

in their groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic* published in 1979, focus on the narrator's liberation from her patriarchal world; they proclaim "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (89). Kennard advances that Gilman's story can be read as a feminist work because readers of the 1970s had access to a set of literary conventions not available to readers of the 1890s while Kolodny argues that Gilman—unlike Edgar Allan Poe, who presents madness as idiosyncratic—projects insanity onto a middle-class wife and mother and turns the home, woman's sacrosanct domestic sphere, into the very source of her psychosis. Although each critic has a decided focus, collectively their work helped "The Yellow Wall-Paper" achieve a privileged place among literature by nineteenth-century women writers.

Gilman scholarship during this period aimed to bring Gilman and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" to the forefront of feminist academic circles. In the frenzy to publish "lost" and "neglected" works by U.S. women writers including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton, scholars felt an urgency to bring more of Gilman's work back into print. For example, Pantheon reissued *Herland* in 1979 with an introduction by Ann J. Lane, billing it as "A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman." Gilman's full oeuvre had not yet received much attention in 1980; to that end, Lane brought out *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, which includes Gilman's short stories and excerpts of novellas originally published in *The Forerunner*, such as *Unpunished* and *The Crux*. Lane did so, hoping to place "'The Yellow Wallpaper' for the first time in the context of a wide selection of Gilman's fiction in general, [so that] it becomes a piece with them, while remaining at the same time special and different" ("Fictional" xvii). Literary anthologies and collections of Gilman's fiction published during the 1980s and into the 1990s reprint "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and many of the stories included in the *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* in part, I would argue, because Lane's book made them readily accessible to an academic audience. There was also a growing interest in Gilman's life during this period, leading to the publication of several biographies published between 1980–1990 by Mary A. Hill, Gary Scharnhorst, and Lane, as well as an invaluable bibliography of Gilman's work by Scharnhorst.

Looking backward, I characterize the "encomium period" of Gilman scholarship as overly accepting of Gilman's work and productive life. Pioneering scholars—with Scharnhorst a notable exception—unabashedly

celebrated Gilman as a feminist foremother by aligning her work with contemporary feminism and seemingly took at face value many of Gilman's now questionable claims about the publication history of "The Yellow Wall-Paper." In turn, Gilman scholars of the 1980s and into the early 1990s—and here I include myself—both read and reinforced 1970s interpretations, which either omit entirely or give only passing attention to Gilman's problems of racism and nativism. These pioneering essays, which tend to be celebratory rather than critical, still command attention due to their inclusion in numerous collections and anthologies, many produced in the 1990s and beyond; as a result, some oft-repeated accounts that we now acknowledge as limited in value have become "legends" in Gilman criticism, to quote Julie Bates Dock (11). "Unlike the critic [Julie] Dock, however, who suggests that twentieth-century feminist scholars distorted facts and engaged in sloppy scholarship in producing the 'dramatic story of Saint Charlotte and the evil Doctor Mitchell,'" Jane F. Thraikill argues that even if Kolodny and Kennard, among others, "doctored the story in a much less disreputable sense" and turned "The Yellow Wall-Paper" into a feminist tale, they successfully engaged in a "collaborative effort" that Gilman herself referred to as "reformist 'organizing'" and "found productive" (552–53).

Further, I suggest we view such studies by pioneering Gilman scholars in the context of their own historical moment. Feminist critics reclaimed "The Yellow Wall-Paper" during a time when the literary canon contained texts predominantly written by male authors and edited by male academics. As Hedges notes in her 1992 retrospective essay provocatively titled "'Out at Last?': 'The Yellow Wallpaper' after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism," the resurgence of the woman's movement, replete with groundbreaking legislative triumphs such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973), may have influenced the way feminist scholars optimistically read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" when the Feminist Press reissued it in 1973 (327–28). In an era of active protest for equal rights and reproductive freedom, feminist concern was targeted against patriarchy. Critics in the subsequent "discontented period" of Gilman criticism, influenced by changes in feminism that reflected more working-class, multicultural, and global perspectives, reacted to views by pioneering critics: they faulted Gilman's lifelong crusade for gender reform and women's autonomy because she neglected to consider issues of race, ethnicity, and social class. Moreover, pioneering articles from the "encomium period" preceded a rising interest in textual studies, an ongoing movement that began to flourish in the later 1990s and forms the subject of Shawn St. Jean's 2006 *"The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Dual-Text Critical Edition*. Which textual version of the story "encomium period" critics

read or reprinted was not an urgent consideration—just that the story was published, given wide visibility, and amply discussed and debated.

As a result of efforts that feminists made during the “encomium period” of criticism and the success of their “reformist ‘organizing,’” “The Yellow Wall-Paper” has become a recovered classic, enshrined in the U.S. literary canon, regularly anthologized, and taught widely in literature and women’s studies or gender studies courses. However, the story’s cult status eventually led to a backlash with “discontented” critics questioning its canonical status and privileged place in anthologies of women’s literature, U.S. literature, and fiction in general—some even likening its place in feminism to Melville’s white whale and Coleridge’s albatross.⁶ The “discontented period” directly responds to the “encomium period” that precedes it: criticism highlighting the dark side of Gilman’s legacy began to appear at the same time as and in reaction to scholarship promoting and praising Gilman’s work. What critics in the “encomium period” celebrated as Gilman’s radical call for women’s liberation now seemed, at the onset of the “discontented period,” to be an agenda laced with prejudice, limited solely to white women of the upper and middle classes. Critics in the later 1980s, 1990s, and beyond, concerned with issues of race, ethnicity, and social class, also cast a critical eye on the prejudices rooted in the color and odor of the ubiquitous wallpaper as well as Gilman’s ethnocentrism, racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, evident in much of her fiction and nonfiction. Scholars, some of whom placed Gilman among other contemporary feminists who espoused racist views, presented these repugnant qualities as “key to many of her ideas about evolution and social motherhood” (Scharnhorst, “Historicizing” 67). Gilman’s rhetoric for white female agency reinforced racial hierarchies and imperialism.

During the “discontented period” of Gilman criticism, scholars also recognized Gilman’s tendencies not to credit other authors who influenced her work, as well as her habit of allowing information to be interpreted to her advantage. In her autobiography published nearly forty years after “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Gilman may have refashioned the truth about some early responses to the publication of her landmark story. With the passage of time, she may have simply forgotten some of the crucial details of its publication history. Misinformation and literary refashioning are not unique to Gilman studies. Perhaps the most important lesson scholars and readers can learn from the “legends” surrounding the story’s reception is that we need to be cautious when reading an author’s account of her own work: many misconceptions about “The Yellow Wall-Paper” in criticism of the 1970s into the early 1990s stem from Gilman herself.

Of the writers whose works characterize this “discontented period”

of Gilman scholarship—and here I include the writings of Gail Bederman, Louise Newman, Janice Haney-Peritz, Susan Lanser, and Alys Eve Weinbaum—I single out the latter three and their essays: Janice Haney-Peritz's "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'" (1986); Susan Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" (1989); and Alys Eve Weinbaum's "Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternalist Feminism" (2001). Haney-Peritz begins her piece by summarizing and positioning herself in response to previous feminist criticism by Hedges, Kennard, Kolodny, and Gilbert and Gubar—who gave "The Yellow Wall-Paper" too hegemonic a reading and too privileged a status, in her opinion. Neither identifying nor sympathizing with the narrator, Haney-Peritz reads the wallpaper by applying Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts to explore the narrator's struggle with the oppressive structures of male discourse and her retreat into the realm of haunted houses from the linguistic realm (in which she can construct her speaking and writing identity). To Haney-Peritz the narrator at the end of the tale remains encrypted in the imaginary. Also questioning the canonical status of Gilman's story lauded exclusively by white feminist academics, Lanser views it from the perspective of late nineteenth-century mass immigration of Asians and southern and eastern Europeans to the United States and the accompanying prejudices toward "yellow skinned" peoples—a term that includes Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned African-Americans as well as Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Italians, and Irish. Lanser brings to light racism and class privilege in Gilman's mission for changing women's lives; if Lanser's attention to the political ideology of the text deflated the story's heretofore privileged status as an exemplary text, it urged Gilman scholars to recognize Gilman's prejudices and biases as part of her legacy.

Weinbaum's essay, first published in *Feminist Studies* (2001) and then reprinted in her book titled *Wayward Reproductions* (2004), focuses on Gilman's nativism and racism as well as the dangers resulting from the enduring power of "encomium" readings by pioneering scholars and those they influenced. Building upon the work of Lanser, Newman, and Bederman, Weinbaum, illustrating that "race animates Gilman's thinking" (273), reads Gilman's autobiography and *Herland* as evidence that her brand of feminism is troublingly preoccupied with issues of "pedigree" and "purity." From Gilman's investigation into her forebears at the age of fifteen to her creation of what Weinbaum reads as a pure Aryan race of Herlanders, complete with a eugenically based system of reproduction that ensures national genealogy and an unpolluted lineage, Gilman emerges as a thinker whose racism,

imperialism, and ethnocentrism preclude the possibility of her being an early feminist role model. Weinbaum does not call for a purging of Gilman's texts from the feminist canon—a move that she recognizes would mimic Gilman's own mission for "genealogical 'purity'"—but rather suggests "that as feminists we keep Gilman in full view" (296), an approach that resonates with practices of "mixed legacy" critics.

The pressing issues of any given historical moment have influenced how an evolving community of feminist critics has variously celebrated and reclaimed, then qualified, and thirdly balanced the strengths and limitations of Gilman's fiction and theory. At the Second International Gilman Conference in 1997, Gary Scharnhorst signaled a third period in Gilman criticism in suggesting that we approach Gilman as a scholar "not in our time but in her own," making a plea for scholars to read all of Gilman's work, "warts" and all. Scharnhorst's essay titled "Historicizing Gilman: A Bibliographer's View" concludes: "In short, many of Gilman's ideas, more stale than fresh, simply do not translate well. Rather than read her writings selectively, rather than appropriate from them only those ideas we can adapt to our purposes, rather than remake Gilman into some kind of femme ideal or role model, I believe that as scholars we should read all of her work we can find but read it critically, measuring her achievement on a historical template, situating her not only in our time but in her own" (71–72). Scharnhorst incisively addresses the failings of critics of the "encomium" and "discontented" periods and, in essence, defines the "mixed legacy period." Rather than "remake" Gilman into a "femme ideal" (as some pioneering critics did) or condemn and dismiss her (as some "discontented" critics did), Scharnhorst urges scholars to view the "fresh," the "stale," and even the noxious on "a historical template" and to read critically as much of her work as we can without discrediting her accomplishments (71–72).

The title of Scharnhorst's essay, his plea, and the "mixed legacy period" itself grow out of a larger shift in literary criticism toward new historicism, a movement beginning in the 1980s and gaining wide influence in the 1990s that situates author and text in a specific time and place to consider the social, political, artistic, and intellectual developments of a particular age. Not all people of Gilman's era shared her racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, and classism; however, these views existed in the intellectual climate at the turn of the twentieth century. The "mixed legacy" approach suggests that if we historicize Gilman, then her biases emerge in the context of prejudices of early twentieth-century Anglo America, evident in other writers of Gilman's time; nonetheless, we cannot use an historical context to excuse or justify her shortcomings either.

In her vision for a new and better world, Gilman was insensitive to the plight of the working-class woman, the immigrant, and the racial minority. "Mixed legacy" criticism does not obscure Gilman's racism, ethnocentrism, and nativism, which "discontented" critics bemoan in their critique of "encomium" scholarship. In fact, some "mixed legacy" scholars—and here I include myself—have reconsidered and reevaluated celebratory assessments of Gilman, which they may have unwittingly perpetuated, or even their willingness to overlook Gilman's racism and ethnocentrism in light of her formative plans for white, middle-class women's rights. We now recognize that Gilman's agenda for widespread improvements to liberate women sets her far ahead of her time, but she expressed her reforms through a language laced with prejudices against race, class, religion, and ethnicity, firmly grounding her work in her time and causing problems for reading Gilman as a feminist foremother or even a positive role model. By the late 1990s, her racism was well documented by, among others, Bederman and Newman.⁷ Critics began to weigh Gilman's shortcomings against her overall achievement, a trend exemplified in the title and contents of *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (2000). For example, in "On Editing Gilman's Diaries" in *The Mixed Legacy*, Denise D. Knight explores how Gilman's diaries include various kinds of information: intimate details of Gilman's life, political and social events of the late nineteenth century, groundwork for Gilman's insightful views on woman's domestic subservience (informing her notion of the "sexuo-economic" condition in *Women and Economics* [1898]), and the "subtleties of late-nineteenth-century class and race issues" (61). In "Reading Gilman in the Twenty-First Century," the concluding essay of the collection, Shelley Fisher Fishkin raises dated aspects of Gilman's agenda (such as votes for women and physical fitness, which are now realities in our modern world) as well as the repugnant side to Gilman (such as her racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and class biases) as she concomitantly celebrates Gilman's insights on gender and dress reform and Gilman's very modern appeals for conservation. Gilman scholars today continue to maintain a healthy dose of skepticism about Gilman's views, a respect for her groundbreaking work without a full-fledged acceptance of it. At the same time, however, twenty-first-century critics, such as Weinbaum, keep potent the views of "discontented critics" in speaking against the tendency of "mixed legacy" scholars to read Gilman as a role model by balancing the distasteful in Gilman with her feminist contributions.

Of the many critics who have consciously attempted to keep both sides of Gilman—her prejudice and her promise—in "full view," I highlight Dana Seitler and her article "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives," published in *American Quarterly* (2003). Seitler establishes from the outset that she wishes neither to repudiate Gilman for her racist and nativist ideologies nor to excuse her in light of Gilman's enduring contributions to feminist thought—thus, from the start, Seitler disassociates her essay from writings of repudiation or reclamation of Gilman's legacy that "discontented" and "encomium" critics have, respectively, employed. Rather, she suggests that we "re-read Gilman's work not for its contradictions but for the coterminous ideologies of feminism and eugenics that she engages" (64). Seitler examines Gilman's nonfiction and fiction (*The Crux*) for its "promise and damage" (83) to argue that Gilman offers readers an understanding of how white women at the turn of the twentieth century turned to a popular scientific discourse with a feminist agenda, viewing eugenic discipline as a means to address and stave off degenerate modernity and exert female agency to positively impact cultural evolution. To view Gilman fully is to recognize that "the driving forces of white progressive feminism helped instantiate and inform what we might think of as a new version of liberal humanism, one in which the mother acts as ideal civic progenitor" (83).

Due to critical interest in reading "all of [Gilman's] work we can find" ("[r]ather than read her writings selectively," as Scharnhorst cautions against), the "mixed legacy" period has also become one of reclamation of Gilman's larger oeuvre ("Historicizing" 71–72). Knight is responsible for many of these recoveries. In the 1990s, Knight brought out *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1994), and, in 2001, she established Gilman as the author of *Art Gems*, previously attributed to the second Mrs. Stetson, Grace Ellery Channing.⁸ In 1997, Knight and I edited and wrote an Afterword to Gilman's heretofore unpublished feminist detective novel, *Unpunished*. With Jennifer S. Tuttle, Knight edited *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, a much-awaited volume published in 2009 by the University of Alabama Press. Others have joined in these recovery efforts. In 2002, Tuttle edited and wrote an introduction to *The Crux*, published by University of Delaware Press; another edition of *The Crux* followed in 2003, edited by Dana Seitler and published by Duke University Press. In 2005, Charlotte Rich edited and wrote an introduction to *What Diantha Did*, also published by Duke University Press. All the novels included in excerpt form in Lane's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* are now available in their entirety. Moreover, the ever-popular "The Yellow Wall-Paper" now attracts critics from fields as diverse as media studies, textual studies, and queer theory as well as literature, psychology, sociology, and women's studies. The "mixed legacy" period has also witnessed a growing interest in pedagogy. Knight and Cyn-

thia J. Davis's 2003 book on teaching "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and *Herland* in the MLA Approaches to Teaching series responds to the critical interest in historicizing Gilman and setting her work in a cultural context, as well as an appreciation of Gilman as "a study in contrasts: progressive in her activism on behalf of women, yet troublingly conservative in her racial views; an outspoken intellectual, but one with very little formal education; an advocate of social motherhood, who relinquished custody of her own young daughter" (xv). My own 2004 sourcebook on Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in the Routledge Guides to Literature series is another recent teaching text; richly annotated, it introduces students to Gilman's landmark story in context with her poems, autobiography, and contemporary documents, reviews, and literature to present Gilman "as a woman ahead of her time, but uncomfortably rooted in her time" (*Charlotte* 2).

In its mix of enlightened views and blatant racism, *Unpunished* illustrates the promise and prejudice we have come to recognize as part of Gilman's oeuvre during this "mixed legacy" period. This last section of my essay offers a detailed discussion of Gilman's detective novel as a case in point. Lillian Robinson was the first to publish a scholarly article on *Unpunished* titled "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* in 1991, when the novel was still not in print. What drew Robinson to the novel was a parallel she perceived between Gilman's despair in the 1920s that women had achieved only a degree of emancipation, that the gaining of the vote led to a dismantling of a mass women's movement—motivating Gilman to write her lone feminist detective novel—and "post-feminism" of the 1990s, "where once again we are being told that women's struggle is over, where female oppression is rapidly slipping out of acceptable political discourse as that discourse itself slips rapidly to the right, and where existing gains are being threatened" (Robinson 283). As Robinson aptly notes of Gilman, in writing *Unpunished*, "The idea, this time, was not so much to hurl feminism into the jaws of post-feminism as to pry open those jaws and slip in a sugar-coated pill" (277). As "mixed legacy" critics, Knight and I likewise saw in *Unpunished* Gilman's efforts to disguise her feminist "pill" in a then popular genre at the twilight of a productive career; however, this novel also afforded an opportunity to explore the ways Gilman, in her final work of fiction, managed to convey a timely message about domestic, emotional, and sexual abuse even as she embedded her personal inclinations (such as physical culture, mercy killings, and the West)⁹ and prejudices (such as racism, classism, and xenophobia) into the novel. *Unpunished* demonstrates how Charlotte Perkins Gilman—a leading intellectual of the women's movement at the

turn of the twentieth century—foresaw the needs of our modern age in her creation of a heroine who fights back against her abusers. Gilman is forward looking. She frees oppressed middle-class white women from subjugation and marital rape well over four decades before society even recognized these kinds of concerns in the 1970s as “battered woman syndrome” or intimate partner violence (IPV), as we currently refer to this syndrome in twenty-first century sociological studies; moreover, she allows her heroine (Jacqueline “Jack” Warner), who uses vigilante justice against her abuser, literally to go unpunished. However, the plot of the detective novel also reveals how Gilman was willing to sacrifice the labor and lives of the working class and racial minorities to pursue her feminist aims.

Gilman wrote *Unpunished* around 1929 when first-wave feminism was declining, and she could not find a ready audience for her work. Her readership was waning, and times were changing. Post-World War I audiences were put off by Gilman’s dual allegiances to socialism and feminism. The women’s movement dwindled following suffrage. Still eager for an audience, Gilman turned to a genre popular between the two World Wars to create a “whodunit” with a satirical twist: in *Unpunished*, she makes a strong case against domestic abuse. Wade Vaughn has emotionally and sexually abused his wife (Iris Booth Vaughn), psychologically battered his disfigured, crippled sister-in-law (Jack Warner), driven his wife to suicide, blackmailed countless people, and attempted, through coercion, to marry his step-daughter (young Iris Booth) to a brute. Although we never meet the most corrupt patriarch in Gilman’s oeuvre, his manifold crimes allow us to construct a character whom Gilman deems “worse than Jack the Ripper” (135). We quickly learn that Vaughn has been “killed four times over. Or four ways at once. Possibly five” (16). We eventually learn that the real cause of death is a heart attack: Jack discloses in the final chapter that to make Vaughn “*feel* for once!” (207), she dresses up as her dead sister so convincingly that she literally frightens Vaughn to death. Gilman vindicates Jack—there is no question that Vaughn should die, and the official explanation of his death remains that “He just died of heart disease!” (206). Gilman uses the death of the socially respected, well-off Vaughn to expose, if not to topple, injustice to women rampant in her patriarchal society and still disturbing in our world today.

Despite the great advances in women’s suffrage, the women’s movement in the early twentieth century did not challenge women’s subjugation in the sanctity of the home, as Gilman did in writing *Unpunished*. In her portrayal of Iris Booth Vaughn, Gilman seems to have read into the mindset of a victim of psychological abuse and marital rape, who could be living in the early twenty-first century, as statistics from current sociological studies confirm.

Gilman takes a stand against domestic abuse long before the term "battered woman syndrome" entered our vocabulary. Granted, "battered woman syndrome" might not exactly fit what Gilman was describing since the phenomenon that Gilman presciently engages was not yet named. Was she thinking about marital rape and abuse in the same way as those who have written about "battered woman syndrome" since the term was coined? Moreover, we can only speculate why Gilman dared to write about a longstanding abuse of women that was not yet being discussed. Might the silence surrounding this yet unnamed syndrome even have motivated Gilman to represent it in her fiction? Despite a potential difference between the behavior Gilman describes in her fiction and "battered woman syndrome," as sociologists coined it decades later, this now recognized pattern of abuse arguably works retroactively to help twenty-first century readers understand how Gilman was forward-thinking in presaging a set of symptoms and a vicious cycle of violence to women that Lenore Walker first defined in 1977.

As Walker notes in *The Battered Woman* (1979), "Most of the women . . . describe incidents involving psychological humiliation and verbal harassment as their worst battering experiences, whether or not they have been physically abused" (xv). Gilman incisively captures Iris Booth Vaughn's feelings of entrapment and despair in her "shrinking" (*Unpunished* 86) from Wade Vaughn's "cruel" love: he teases her for her absentmindedness, criticizes her nervous cough, and tells her how to act and to dress, actions ultimately leading her to take her own life with a favorite black-and-white scarf that Vaughn despises (he insists that she wear bright colors).¹⁰ In exploring the profile of a batterer in *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence*, Linda Gordon confirms throughout her study that violence is but a means to increase the abuser's control over his wife. Part ego-maniac, part sadist (Gilman, *Unpunished* 96), Vaughn fits the profile of the domestic abuser described by criminologist Ronald Flowers by "resort[ing] to violence through brute strength and force as a means to maintain respect and domination over their wives and lovers" (15). Moreover, like men who batter, Vaughn justifies his sexual abuse in finding fault with his wife for not being sexually responsive or deferential (Ptacek 147). In forcing Iris to submit sexually, Vaughn has been guilty, in effect, of what we now call marital rape, although in the late 1920s, the way he manages his "wife/property" would not have landed him in a court of law.

Vaughn's verbal violence appears equally chilling. A "Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory" developed by R. M. Tolman in 1989 to assess how males control their female partners includes many of the traits that Vaughn exhibits in his psychological abuse of his wife: shaming, name

calling, and labeling the victim as crazy (qtd. in O’Leary 6–7). In 1991, C. M. Sullivan, J. A. Parisian, and W. S. Davidson compiled a list of thirty-three traits to measure the abuser’s manipulation, harassment, and ridicule of a victim, including threats and restrictions that echo those traits Vaughn exhibits in *Unpunished* (qtd. in O’Leary 8). Kris Henning and Lisa M. Klesges, in a 2003 study published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, compiled a list of questions to give insight into the profile of the abuser, including whether the abuser threatens to harm children if the relationship ends, acts jealous, restricts friendships, calls the victim names, and frequently checks up on the victim (Table 1, 862). Vaughn, who exhibits many of these characteristics, most disturbingly tells his fragile wife, Iris: “If you care to remain at home with your sister and your child you must be calmer, more naturally affectionate, more obedient. If you make any noise or disturbance of any sort I am sure that an examining physician would quite agree with me that—restraint was necessary, and seclusion. You need sleep my dear. Come back to bed” (Gilman, *Unpunished* 88).¹¹

Gilman keenly recognized that domestic violence cuts across boundaries of age, social class, and gender: Vaughn’s psychological abuse of two white, middle-class women extends to their children, respectively, young Iris Booth and Hal Warner. Iris and Jack are disinherited because each marries against her father’s wishes. Following the fatal car crash that kills their husbands, they have no relatives to support them, and, unlike her sister Jack, Iris has no skills or resources of her own to support herself without her batterer, whom she reluctantly marries, and then quietly takes her own life. Vaughn refuses to pay for the reconstructive surgery of his disfigured and wheelchair-bound sister-in-law, whom he psychologically abuses: carrying her into his study, he insists she give him “a nice crooked kiss” (82). Although Jack possesses self-taught clerical skills, she lacks the resources to leave: she is too disfigured to flee since Vaughn refuses to pay for her surgery. Jack is also afraid for her niece, young Iris, and her son, Hal Warner, who are also under Vaughn’s slave-driving power.¹² As Hal testifies at the inquest into Vaughn’s murder, “He was tyrannical—and enjoyed it. . . . [W]e couldn’t call our souls our own” (164). Detective Bess Hunt, who goes undercover as a maid to help solve the case, further confirms Jack’s lack of legal redress and resulting powerlessness in saving herself and the children following Iris’s suicide: “Even if she could have escaped with them, any sort of court would have given them back to him—what could she bring against him—that would hold?” (136). Gilman anticipates what sociologists today confirm—battered women lack the resources to leave an abusive partner and commonly fear that the bat-

terer will abuse their children; national research substantiates this fear with chilling statistics (New York State Office).¹³

Jack concludes that Vaughn's emotional and sexual abuse of Iris drives her to suicide, which Gilman equates to murder: "We stayed two years in Wade's house, during which time he killed my sister. I don't mean with an axe, nothing so crude, nothing against the law—not he! He loved her, as such a man loves; . . . But he hated her because she did not love him and had loved Sydney Booth" (86). In making a conscious choice to end her life, Iris infuriates her abuser, who, Gilman tells us, frantically tries to revive dead Iris; he responds to his wife's suicide like a feral cat toying with a mouse: "did you ever take a mouse away from a cat, kill it, and give it back again?" (89). Gilman's connection of Iris's suicide with Vaughn's abuse of her is once again prescient. The 2003 CDC report titled *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence* advances, "Abused women experience more physical health problems and have a higher occurrence of depression, drug and alcohol use, and suicide attempts than do women who are not abused" (Centers 3), and the CDC backs this claim with five studies completed between 1989 and 1996.¹⁴

Battered women still face violence in the early twenty-first century even though courts of law now hold men accountable for violence against women. Safe Space, a support organization for battered women, offers a staggering statistic from the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention: battering remains the major cause of injury to American women, ranking above traffic accidents, muggings, and (nonmarital) rapes combined.¹⁵ According to Maggie Fronk, Executive Director of the Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis Services of Saratoga County, recent studies suggest battering occurs every nine seconds in the United States.¹⁶ As Knight and I conclude in our "Afterword" to *Unpunished*, Gilman "seemed to anticipate a time when 'a man [who] thinks he has a right to manage his own wife' (87) had better think again, lest he be made to answer to a legal system that is finally holding men accountable for violence against women" (232). Certainly Gilman's portrait of such violence is limited by its recognition of only a narrow female demographic. A twenty-first-century author might be much more likely to consider how issues of race, ethnicity, and social class help explain why some groups of women are able to flee their abusers while other groups of women more readily become IPV victims. That Gilman dared to present this message in 1929, however, makes her vision not only prophetic but bold.¹⁷

In bringing justice to a middle-class, white heroine in her efforts to build a world with gender equality, Gilman was willing to exploit, and even do violence to, the working class and the immigrant. Recognizing this intensely

problematic underside of Gilman's feminism is a key element of a "mixed legacy" interpretation: arguably, Gilman's feminist plot even depends on a degree of oppression of the racial "other." Gilman refers irreverently to black Americans, who are hired in the novel to perform housekeeping services, such as laundry and cooking, for the white middle class: "our little black Jenny" does the laundry for Bess and Jim Hunt and Jack Warner's family (63); later in the novel, an "amiable colored helper" (167) serves lunch to all the white folks during the inquest of Vaughn's murder. Certainly "little black Jenny's" work as a laundress allows Bess more time to be an undercover sleuth; acting in that capacity, Bess finds in a wall safe Jack's "record . . . of the goings on in that house" (69), which proves invaluable to the Hunts solving the crime, ultimately facilitating Gilman's feminist aims. The invisible labor of the "colored helper" seemingly allows the wheels of justice to turn during the inquest into Vaughn's death and ultimately benefits the white, middle-class women who attend the investigation. We even see traces of Gilman's "mixed legacy" in her decision to have a white, middle-class woman play the part of a maid. Bess Hunt may temporarily be pleased to earn praise for being "an honest servant girl" (69) noted for her efficiency and skill in cooking, but she chooses to work as a maid to assist her husband and their joint efforts at sleuthing; once she gains the information she needs to solve the Vaughn case, Bess has the liberty to leave her working-class labor, and her temporary stint at housekeeping ultimately benefits the white, middle-class women at the center of the plot.

Most troubling is Gilman's dismissal of the accidental death of an Italian manservant from "sunny Italy" (*Unpunished* 130) whose name Gilman makes inconsequential: the slain manservant becomes "Angelo or Mario or something" (130), "Beppo or Marco or whatever he is" (133), then a string of other names rhyming with "o," and, most distressingly, a "Wop" (29). The unfortunate "Beppo" becomes a casualty in the Vaughn murder: Joe White regrets killing "that little dago in the alley" (199), but our heroine, Jack Warner—Gilman's mouthpiece—dismisses his concern, saying: "that was no loss after all!" (202). This repugnant scene in *Unpunished* is more than "Italian bashing." While the death of the "little dago" is apparently an accident, it enables Joe White, whom Jack calls a "gentleman" (202), to escape from the clutches of "that—unspeakable man!" (199) along with two other "servants," Norah and Nellie Brown, Joe's wife and mother-in-law, all of whom settle under new names in Gilman's beloved California. In the novel, casual homicide of an Italian emerges as a small and necessary cost to pay for the liberation of Joe, Norah, and Nellie, all white victims of Vaughn's blackmail.

Racial stereotyping also extends to the Asian in this novel. We learn that advances in reconstructive surgery might grant Jack independence, mobility, and self-esteem, but Vaughn refuses: "When I asked to have it done, humiliated myself and begged, urged that if I were straightened out I could earn enough to pay him back, he said I was sufficiently useful to him as I was, and more likely to stay! Like the Chinese women" (70–71). While Gilman embeds the nativist tendency to stereotype in her portrayal of Vaughn as a misogynist patriarch, this racial stereotyping of Chinese women convincingly speaks to Gilman's xenophobia, which appears even more palpably in her representation of Italian Americans. In its persistent racism toward a range of minority groups, *Unpunished* remains an anathema in our time.

Unpunished illustrates how, in Gilman's fiction and theoretical works, "her racism was deep-woven into the fabric of her social thought, as inextricable from it as a Gordian knot" (Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 67).¹⁸ Gilman's reactionary insensitivity becomes entangled with her forward-thinking feminism and forms an interconnected part of her "mixed legacy." Gilman's ethnic and racial stereotyping and insensitivity to working-class women in her final work of fiction—which the plot seemingly depends upon to achieve her feminist purpose so smoothly—do not translate well in an age where we are now keenly sensitive to such lingering inequalities. Concomitantly, Gilman's message about the consequences of physical and emotional abuse in *Unpunished* valuably anticipates what we now recognize as the very real dangers of "battered woman syndrome" and other forms of interpersonal violence (IPV), making her work chilling and timely.

Unpunished is just one of many of Gilman's works to be reclaimed during this "mixed legacy" period of criticism. The publishing boom of Gilman fiction and criticism shows no sign of abating, as the publication of this very collection attests. Critics writing about Gilman in the first decades of the twenty-first century well recognize that the future of Gilman scholarship requires "looking backward," situating new arguments in relation to contributions by "encomium," "discontented," and "mixed legacy" critics. Sari Edelstein exhibits this practice, for example, in "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper." In establishing her "mixed legacy" argument that Gilman critiques yet undeniably participates in sensational practices of "yellow journalism," Edelstein nimbly nods to and positions her claim in terms of previous scholarship celebrating Gilman's indictment of the repressive cult of motherhood and the male medical model, the "encomium" view, as well as studies deriding Gilman's "now well-documented nativism" (73), which "discontented" critics challenged. New discoveries about Gilman's

oeuvre, changing political climates, and novel approaches to literature and culture (e.g., material culture) will continue to affect the way we read Gilman's work as literature and social criticism. To that end, in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004), Jennifer Fleissner, who reads Gilman's work alongside that of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, analyzes "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in relation to "modernized" notions of industrialism, consumerism, and compulsion¹⁹—the nameless narrator reads compulsively and becomes "stuck" in the endless process of consuming details of the yellow wallpaper lining the walls of her suffocating domestic sphere that she no longer wants to leave; if tearing the wallpaper is an attempt at liberation, Fleissner argues, the narrator becomes "'stuck on' the sticky wallpaper in a sense that is no longer merely metaphorical but has become quite literal indeed. It is as if the full realization of the meaning of womanhood is itself what entraps her" (67).

The "mixed legacy" period of Gilman criticism, which remains the dominant view today, offers the promise of a balanced reading in which critics acknowledge, but do not excuse, Gilman's limitations even as we continue to appreciate her reforms. Gilman's insightful vision for women to fight back against their abusers—which women in the twenty-first century have not fully realized—creates an enduring part of her legacy. At the end of her extraordinarily productive life, Gilman feared that society had made poor progress in attaining the widespread reforms she had envisioned for women. We can only hope that the offensive views and theories that Gilman regrettably espouses will continue to lose credibility while her most visionary ideas may one day become realities in women's continued progress in the twenty-first century.²⁰

NOTES

1. Gilman earned praise from Bellamy for her poetry that championed the Nationalist Movement. He even called her "the poet of nationalism" in an 1893 essay in *New Nation* (qtd. in Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 65).

2. It seems fitting to apply the concept of "periodicity" from the field of art history to review Gilman's achievements in literature and social criticism: prior to her first marriage to Providence artist Charles Walter Stetson, Gilman took a two-year course of study at the Rhode Island School of Design, gave art lessons, and painted advertising cards for Kendall's Soap Company before turning to writing to make her creative mark in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and journalism.

3. While scholars commonly refer to each other's ideas, this tendency seems particularly prominent in Gilman criticism, wherein scholars align themselves with and against

contributions of other critics. For example, in her 1986 essay, "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,'" Janice Haney-Peritz begins her piece by summarizing and positioning herself against previous feminist criticism by Hedges, Kennard, Kolodny, and Gilbert and Gubar.

4. In my 2004 Routledge Guide titled *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, I discuss how feminist criticism of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" exemplifies this trajectory; see 71–80.

5. In the early 1970s when feminist scholars were resurrecting long-neglected works including Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva were known to academics, likely informing readings of Gilman's story in patriarchal domination as well as language and gender. A prominent French existentialist philosopher and writer, Simone de Beauvoir explored the historical treatment and social construction of Woman as abnormal, deviant, and the quintessential "other" in *The Second Sex*; first published in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1953, it is now hailed as a major feminist work. The contributions of Julia Kristeva, a key proponent of French feminism, made a significant impact on feminism in the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly her consideration of the intersections of language, culture, literature, and gender. *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* came out in a French edition in 1969 and in English, as titled above, in 1980; *Revolution in Poetic Language* came out in a French edition in 1974 and in English, under the above title, in 1984.

6. Elaine Hedges makes this point in "'Out at Last?'" 320.

7. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, and Louise Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For example, Bederman, in chapter 4 titled "'Not to Sex—But to Race!'" Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Civilized Anglo-Saxon Womanhood, and the Return of the Primitive Rapist," advances the notion that while Gilman is now recognized as a "feminist foremother," "historians have not recognized that her work was firmly based upon the raced and gendered discourse of civilization and, as such, was at its very base racist" (122).

8. See Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Lost Book."

9. See Golden and Knight, Afterword 228–30.

10. For more discussion of Iris's suicide and the sociological relevance of Gilman's forward-thinking novel, see Golden and Knight, "No Good Deed Goes *Unpunished?*"

11. Likewise, reporting on a 2005 domestic violence workshop in upstate New York in an article titled "Workshop to Help Sort Domestic Violence Myths from Facts," Margarita Raycheva comments: "A woman can have many reasons to stay with a partner who beats or abuses her on a regular basis. She might be afraid for her children, she might have no money or she could have been threatened by her abuser" (3A).

12. Jack's fears still appear well founded. In a 2004 literature review titled "Psychological Abuse of Women," Virginia Kelly notes, "Psychological abuse may affect a woman's overall psychological well-being to the same extent as physical abuse or battering" (383).

13. A 2003 study of intimate partner violence quoted in *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence* concludes that, each year, nearly 5.3 million victimizations occur among women in the United States who are eighteen years or older (Centers 19). This figure

is likely conservative: psychological and domestic abuse remains underreported since researchers have been unable to agree on a definition of psychological abuse and intimate partner violence; victims of same-sex and heterosexual abuse have been reluctant to report this crime, and repeated assaults to one or more family members go unreported.

14. Maggie Fronk, executive director of the Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis Services of Saratoga County, reported in her interview of 18 May 2005 that today it takes battered women an average of eight times to leave an abusive situation permanently. Moreover, Iris's choice to take her life chillingly reverberates in current statistics of battered women by Kris Henning and Lisa Klesges, Virginia Kelly, and the Centers for Disease Control. I am grateful to Skidmore College graduate Katie Largo '06, a Sociology major, for her help in my research for this essay by directing me to articles on what is now commonly referred to as interpersonal violence (IPV).

15. Safe Space, a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, has compiled a range of chilling statistics about domestic violence. For more information about their statistics, contact Safe Space, P. O. Box 594, Butte, Montana, 50701.

16. Fronk included this statistic in her interview of 18 May 2005.

17. In her creation of an empowered and ingenious disabled heroine, Gilman also anticipates the needs of disabled citizens in our society; recent legislation mandating handicap accessible accommodations for all public buildings has allowed disabled citizens to more fully participate in their world. In addition to its incisive social message, Gilman's final work of fiction allows us to take a fuller look at themes across her oeuvre and gain a deeper insight into her convictions. *Unpunished* reveals how Gilman sustained some of her fictional techniques and embedded her personal inclinations from earlier works. As Knight and I observe in our Afterword, Gilman recalls from "The Yellow Wall-Paper" both the first-person narrative technique and the notion of writing as therapy. The West emerges as a panacea for her characters in *Unpunished*, as it does in *The Crux* (1911) and her short story "Joan's Defender" (1916). In her creation of the maligned Dr. Ross Akers, who is guilty of mercy killing, Gilman takes a stand for euthanasia: she creates the kind of Kevorkian-like physician she personally searched for as she planned her own suicide in the 1930s. Also vivid is Gilman's belief in physical culture, evident in her short story "Old Water" (1911) and *Mag—Marjorie* (1912). *Unpunished* also boasts a surprise ending reminiscent of the denouement of many of her short stories, including "The Vintage" (1916) and "Turned" (1911).

18. See Scharnhorst, *Charlotte* 75; he notes, for example, how in *What Diantha Did* (1910), the middle-class white entrepreneur, Diantha Bell, employs ethnic and racial types to provide white customers with housekeeping services and comments on Gilman's racial stereotyping in her theoretical works, such as *Women and Economics* (1898).

19. Walter Benn Michaels offers an earlier argument about Gilman and commodity culture in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Benn Michaels discusses "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in terms of production and consumption, processes essential to capitalism.

20. I thank Jennifer S. Tuttle, Carol Farley Kessler, and Sari Edelstein for their excellent suggestions on ways to expand my plenary session presentation at the 2006 Charlotte Perkins Gilman Conference into this essay.

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NEW TEXTS

The Torn Voice in “The Giant Wistaria” and “The Unnatural Mother”

JILL RUDD

Phyllis Rose suggests: “Often the most radical perspective you can adopt on a person’s experience is his or her own. . . . Each of us, influenced perhaps by one ideology or another, generates our own plot, our own symbolic landscape, a highly individual configuration of significance through which we view our own experience and which I call a personal mythology” (Schwartz x). Lynne Schwartz cites Rose’s passage and goes on to adopt it with regard to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, explaining that “Gilman’s personal myth turns on the themes of rational decision and calculated acts, the power of the will in service of a social ideal. That is, she stuck to the challenge she had set herself as a girl—to find her work and do it” (x). Critics are used to thinking of Gilman as strong willed and decisive and to finding these qualities presented in her writing, particularly in her short stories, which are populated by women making tough decisions with enviable clarity and firmness of purpose. Characters (and readers) may have moments of doubt, but they find resolutions and adhere to reforms. Gilman exploits the brevity of the short story genre (which she extends to include many of the attributes of fable) to press home her agenda for social change and above all to galvanize her fellow women into active, personal reform.

However, as Mary A. Hill reminds us, Gilman’s letters reveal an alternative voice—a passionate one, sometimes uncertain, certainly torn. This emotional and romantic side also forms part of Gilman’s landscape, emerging in

a desire to have acts of social service (“human work,” as Gilman calls it) duly recognized and rewarded, often in terms that are surprisingly traditional, such as finding romance or family love. Gilman’s “personal myth” certainly “turns on . . . rational decision and calculated acts, the power of the will in the service of a social ideal,” which is often articulated in terms that expose and explode traditions. Her symbolic landscape, however, is littered with romantic monuments, testifying to the comfort and appeal of old habits. “Romantic” here is used in its wider sense to encapsulate the archetypal love-plot, gothic twists and thrills, danger, ghosts, rescue, and heroism. These elements, too, find their way into that personal mythology. Without wishing to suggest that to read according to personal mythology is the equivalent of reading biographically, I offer here readings of two of Gilman’s 1890s stories, “The Giant Wistaria” and “An Unnatural Mother,”¹ which illustrate how Gilman’s “highly individual configuration of significance” results in a torn voice through which two independent views of one situation inhabit a story, without one finally ousting the other.

This lack of final, unambiguous victory is intriguing, particularly given Gilman’s description of her literary method: “As far as I had any method in mind, it was to express the idea with clearness and vivacity, so that it might be apprehended with ease and pleasure” (*Living* 284–85). That clarity and vivacity does indeed result in an ease of understanding, so much so that as readers we often anticipate the resolution of the tale and believe we know the moral to extract. It is worth setting this avowed method alongside Gilman’s description of the role of literature in her essay “Masculine Literature” (1911): “The makers of books are the makers of thoughts and feelings for the people in general” (90).² As a “maker” herself, Gilman intended to direct her readers’ thoughts towards social change: across the gamut of her writing Gilman articulates the struggle between externally endorsed established views and her own reformist, personal conviction, with a view to overthrowing the established power relations between the two. But that overthrow is more a simple inversion of the prevailing system than a thoroughgoing remaking of it. Her individual ideology strives to become the authoritative discourse for her readers, just as it is for many (though not all) of her protagonists. The ascendancy of her authorial view is never in doubt, even though the overall tale and the language she uses contain sounds of dissent. The result is a kind of ventriloquism familiar to Gilman’s readers. We are used to hearing her message come across loud and clear in stories whose narrative voice and view seem unmistakable. For example, the irony with which the title phrase “An Unnatural Mother” must be heard is apparent even before a first reading of this story is fully finished. It seems that the reader is never unsure about

what the text's final opinion is, and that opinion seems to be identical with the author's intention, insofar as readers can surmise it.

Yet, as this essay will show, Gilman's work is less cut-and-dried than it seems. We know what her avowed beliefs are, but her voice is troubled by the dissent within it, some of which seems to come from her own unease with the absolute conviction she is trying to promote. Thus in "An Unnatural Mother" we know that we ought to reject the description of Esther, the heroine, as "unnatural" and to reject likewise the views of those who seek to stigmatize her memory. Yet some lingering sympathy with traditional opinion remains, making the final statement all the more strident in its efforts to deny such doubts. The nature of Gilman's complexity is made evident when contrasting "An Unnatural Mother" to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "The Chief Operator," a story in a similar vein but untroubled by the cross-currents found in Gilman's tale. Gilman's earlier gothic story, "The Giant Wistaria," circumvented such difficulties by exploiting gothic's readiness to leave contradictions and mysteries unresolved. This tale is a narrative of two parts, in which the final fate of an unmarried mother of the 1780s is revealed only in the 1890s (Gilman's present day); yet while the shape of the tale suggests that the later period is more enlightened than the earlier, the tableau that ends the story leaves readers less sure of how different these two actually are in terms of women's roles and fates. So the question marks hanging over the endings of these two tales invite us to reconsider our view of Gilman in order to recognize the torn element within the confident voice that marks her writing.

In both "The Giant Wistaria" and "An Unnatural Mother" two independent views of one situation inhabit the text, and neither finally routs the other. This effect is foregrounded at the end of "The Giant Wistaria" with the latter-day characters standing in silence over the remains of the girl featured in the 1790s part of the tale. The two narratives are thus brought together on the page, but only the readers know both and, even for them, the eighteenth-century story remains incomplete. Instead, following the pattern of a good gothic tale, Gilman leaves her readers with a sense of unresolved mystery. In "An Unnatural Mother" the device is still present, but less consciously so. Here the opposing views are characterized on the one hand by the City Boarder, Maria-Amelia, and the passing figure of Mrs. Stone, and on the other by Mrs. Briggs and her circle. The evident authorial narrative sides with the City Boarder's camp. Yet although the authorial voice is dominant and authoritative, it is also uncomfortably aware that it has some sympathy with Mrs. Briggs's traditionalist opinions—the very opinions it seeks to overthrow. In other contexts and for other authors such complexity would simply be regarded as part of their narratorial skill. In Gilman's case this unresolved

dual voicing of the text is particularly interesting due to her assertion that her writing was not intended to be literary but was instead intended to convey ideas “with clearness and vivacity.” That technique does indeed result in an ease of understanding, so much so that as readers we often anticipate the resolution of the tale and its attendant moral. We are then pleased to have our expectations fulfilled and ourselves proved right. However, it is possible that the ease with which we foresee the conclusion of the story means we too easily overlook elements that Gilman left unresolved in her determination to make her tale a clear and effective vehicle for her reformist ideals. These elements are often indicative of the attitudes that the story’s plot seeks to combat. Rather than defeating such views by force of argument, which admittedly runs the risk of making a light, entertaining story into a heavy-handed piece of didacticism, Gilman often ends with a rhetorical flourish. This flourish leads her readers to believe that they have correctly understood her point and to interpret the outcome of the plot accordingly. Moreover, the tone of triumphant irony that usually marks these statements assumes or even asserts concurrence between dominant authorial voice and reader. This means that the stories finish on a note of absolute confidence in a shared attitude, even if further scrutiny reveals that we are not entirely sure of what is being said. For example, the final words of “An Unnatural Mother” are, “She was an unnatural mother.” This verdict is delivered by Miss Jacobs in tones of unqualified criticism but heard by most readers as deeply ironic since the story has shown that Esther, the “she” in question, was selflessly heroic.

Rhetorically effective as such final flourishes are, this device carries a risk. What if that confidence is misplaced and we do not wholeheartedly concur with the view that creates the ironic tone? Or what if the narrative of the story has been too complex for us to be entirely sure which view, or which voice, has won out at the end? In the two stories I focus upon here, the voices are each associated with specific time periods, as past events are reviewed in the present day of the 1890s. As readers we inhabit both views and so, as we might expect, are made aware of how the views of the past inform the habits of the present. Moreover, since both periods exist simultaneously in the fabric of the plot and also simultaneously in our readerly understanding, both views carry weight. This makes it difficult to dismiss either without reservation, despite Gilman’s commanding rhetoric. A case in point is “An Unnatural Mother.” Upon first reading, this appears to be a tale of how a young woman’s public-spirited sacrifice is most ungratefully rewritten into proof of her moral defectiveness by a group of older women.

This group of village matrons tells a City Boarder the story of Esther. Following the death of her mother and young siblings, Esther was brought up

by her doctor father, with few restrictions but much practical information, including (to the scandal of the village matrons) knowledge of both childbirth and syphilis. She was popular with peers and younger children but never with the group of middle-aged women who are recounting her story. Esther married an artist from outside the community whom she met wandering in the hills. They had a daughter and lived in Esther's house, up the valley from the village, by the dam that creates the local reservoir. One evening, walking out to meet her husband, Esther saw that the dam was about to give way and ran down to the village to raise the alarm without pausing to collect her baby en route. As a result, all lives in the three villages threatened were saved, but Esther and her husband both drowned, swept away as they each tried to reach their daughter, who miraculously survived the flood. For this act of sacrifice or desertion, Esther is dubbed the "unnatural mother" of the title. The story ends with Mrs. Briggs, one of the village matrons, asserting: "She neglected her own to look after other folks—the Lord never gave her them other children to care for!" As mentioned above, the last word goes to Miss Jacobs, a spinster, who agrees: "and here's her child, a burden on the town! She was an unnatural mother!" (Gilman, "Unnatural" 106).

The plot alone is surely enough to make readers conclude that Esther's action was noble and that the assembled women are bigoted. Blinded by the moral code that cannot accept a woman brought up in the enlightened way Esther was, we hear these matrons exact petty revenge by traducing Esther's character. Despite the obvious moral of the narrative, Gilman does not leave us to arrive at this conclusion unaided. The City Boarder represents the liberal views associated with more advanced city-dwellers, while the town's own more open-minded younger generation is represented by Maria Amelia, "the youngest Briggs girl, still unmarried at thirty-six" (98), who is sent out of the room on a spurious errand when the talk turns to the scandal of Esther being told "how babies come" and about the "Bad Disease" (101–2). Maria Amelia's version of Esther is as "a real nice girl . . . so nice to us children" (100), while the City Boarder provides an excuse for Esther's tale to be told. Between them, these two offer the alternative (and surely preferred) interpretation of Esther's actions, and although that view is not always literally voiced, Gilman ensures her readers register it. Take, for example, the collective response to Miss Jacobs's scandalized incomplete sentence describing the conduct of Esther and her husband: "'And for open love making—' They all showed deep disapproval at this memory. All but the City Boarder and Maria Amelia" (103). Other details also predispose us toward Esther. She spent time with the mill-children ("dirty Kanucks," according to Mrs. Briggs), often going out with "a whole swarm" of them on an outing appar-

ently called “open air school” (103), and she allowed her daughter to romp around, dressed in the simplest of clothes, if at all (104). The creation of this proto-hippy earth-mother (one we might term a “natural mother”) is surely a deliberate contrast to the normative version of the doting mother exemplified in Mrs. Briggs, who saw to it that her children were always neatly turned out and who believes “in medicine and plenty of it.” She gave her children “a good clearance, spring and fall, whether anything ailed ’em or not” (100). Importantly, however, and despite this comic touch, we are not allowed to denigrate Mrs. Briggs’s affection for her children: “the poor old eyes filled with tears as she thought of the eight little graves in the churchyard, which she never failed to keep looking pretty, even now” (104).

Mrs. Briggs, mother of thirteen, eight of whom die, is the dominant voice in this story. She is joined by Miss Jacobs, a spinster whose hopes of marrying a widowed doctor were never fulfilled, and Mrs. Simmons, the village dress-maker, a young widow with a “sickly boy to care for” (98). The connotations of this choice of characters is itself fascinating and offers material for much speculation, especially in the light of their vehement objection to a doctor who sees fit to inform his daughter about matters of sexual health. One might wonder at the cause of Mrs. Simmons’s son’s illness or the deaths of eight of Mrs. Briggs’s children (we are told, incidentally, that Esther’s mother and siblings died of polio). However, what is particularly interesting is that although we are evidently expected to regard these women as fundamentally mistaken in their estimation of Esther, Gilman does not actually dismiss them altogether. On the contrary, Gilman literally gives them the last word. Despite the overt irony of that last paragraph, this is a tacit acknowledgment of the power and persistence of the voice of traditional values, even in the ears of someone dedicated to reform. One could argue that Gilman has no need to destroy this voice explicitly, even that it would be heavy-handed to do so. After all, Gilman has guided our reading from the outset by having Maria Amelia insist before the full story is given, that “if she hadn’t left hers [her child] we should all have lost ours, sure” (98). Nonetheless, given the overtly proselytizing nature of her stories, the fact that Gilman not only leaves the old guard in possession of the field but also kills off a character who is surely a shining example of the superiority of the new values of independence and community spirit she is trying to promote, warrants readers’ further consideration.

In terms of simple plot there are several reasons why one might choose to drown the heroine and let the child survive. Had Esther lived, the matrons of the village would have been faced with her increased popularity and status as a local hero: they would surely have had to admit some kind of grudging

gratitude. Denigrating the heroism of the dead and dismissing the courage of those one can persist in regarding as morally suspect is much easier if one never has to look them in the eye. A contrast to the views of the "ladies" assembled in Mrs. Briggs's parlor is provided in the comment that the surviving baby was taken in by a Mrs. Stone, who figures only as someone who "thought a heap of Esther" (Gilman, "Unnatural" 104). The point is driven home by having that same child, now a healthy and happy adult, pass by the window as the tale is being told. Nevertheless, it would have been equally possible to have had the City Boarder learn the story behind why a particular woman in the village is ostracized by the female town worthies. Plot requirements alone will not suffice to explain the ending of this tale. Nor, *pace* Gary Scharnhorst, will the notion that Esther's story simply "silhouettes [Gilman's] own utilitarian attitude towards motherhood during these years" (*Charlotte* 35). Rather I suggest that this story accommodates Gilman's personal "symbolic landscape," which never fully reconciled her conflicting views on the various sacrifices that seem to be required to validate both motherhood and social duty. Thus Esther's action, which risks her child's life and takes her own, proves her instinct for socially minded sacrifice. But the condemnation of her heroism by the town matrons validates exactly the opposite kind of sacrifice—the kind that places one's own child above all else. At the same time, Esther's status as a heroine is assured by the fact of her own death while returning to the house in an attempt to rescue the baby she is accused of unnaturally deserting. The fact that her baby survives offers a whisper of dissent to the apparent demands of a tragic irony that requires both parents to lose their lives trying to rescue a child who lives anyway. We could almost say that had Esther actually been devoid of the kind of "natural mother instinct" she is accused of lacking, she would not have attempted the return and thus she and her daughter would have survived the flood. Were Gilman promoting a fully "utilitarian attitude towards motherhood," she could have had Esther survive as a testament to cool-mindedness and quick action under pressure, which is then rewarded in a post-deluge reunion between mother and child. But *she* doesn't. Instead she elects to drown her heroine and leave her reputation at the mercy of those who persist in referring to her "unnatural" behavior.

The distinctiveness of this choice is best seen through contrast with a very similar story by one of Gilman's direct contemporaries, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. "The Chief Operator" (1909) appeared fourteen years after Gilman's *Impress* version of "An Unnatural Mother" and five before *The Forerunner* version. It offers a different take on the plot of a woman willingly sacrificing her own life in order to save many in her community.³ The protagonist, Mrs.

Sarah Raven, is the chief operator of a telephone exchange in a small river-side town. One particularly stormy day in August 1908, Sarah Raven receives a call from an exchange based farther upstream warning her that the dam has broken and a devastating flood is heading towards the town. She is urged to desert the building and run for her life. This is the first of several such urgings in the story, but Sarah Raven keeps her post as chief operator and begins to call her subscribers to warn them of the impending danger, despite her own perilous position. The inevitable happens, and the next morning her body is found twelve miles downriver from where her exchange building once stood, now utterly washed away.

Like Esther, Sarah has proved her willingness to give her own life in the cause of saving others: we are told explicitly that “there are fifty persons alive to-day” who would have perished had she not raised the alarm (Phelps 374). Unlike Esther, she is hailed by all as a heroine and indeed made into a local martyr. Her expression in death confirms the blessed state of the socially-minded: she lies among trees “so quietly, one might have said, from the smile of her so happily” that “it would have been difficult to suppose, as one regarded her mercifully unmarred face, that she had ever suffered” (373). There is no suggestion of denigrating her actions or regarding Sarah as anything other than heroic. Any suggestion of demur is silenced by the presence of Mary and Molly, the two younger women who worked the exchange with her and whom she ordered away in time to escape to safety, who stand “childishly wringing their hands. For once in their little lives they did not talk. They felt ashamed to” (372). Of course they have nothing to be ashamed of, but the simple acknowledgment of the guilt they feel at having escaped while Sarah remained serves to prevent any cavil at the reverence heaped on the dead heroine.

Other details of this emotive story also help confirm the respect due to Sarah. As mentioned, she is a widow and, we presume, childless and so free from the kind of maternal duty Esther is so roundly castigated for abandoning. Moreover, Sarah proves her domestic credentials by saving a series of surrogate family members: the “childish” Molly and Mary are clearly daughter figures, and old Mr. Rice, the grocer who owns the shop beneath the exchange, is a surrogate father. Sarah saves him by banishing him from his post at her side with oblique mention of others whom he could help. Finally, perhaps most significantly, the first person Sarah rings to warn about the flood is her step-mother—a decision that allows her to express due gratitude to a woman who has “been a good mother to [her]” (362) and also confirms the lasting love she has for her deceased father. No criticism can be leveled for ties unacknowledged. Moreover Sarah’s position as romantic heroine is

confirmed when her step-mother tells all that the day she is found is the anniversary of her wedding. Every emotional element is in play; but Phelps does not leave it there. Like Gilman, she is keen to ensure that her protagonist is fully recognized and admired for her deeds, so she brings in external verification of Sarah's martyr status in the figure of the manager of the telephone company. He elevates Sarah first from local hero to company figurehead, as he asserts it will be "the company's privilege" to take care of the funeral rites, and then further to the realm of universal icon by declaring, "No, she is not ours—she is the world's" (374). The final image is thus one of a tight-knitted community gathered round the body of their local telephone operator whose exchange head-receiver is redefined in the last sentence of the story as her "crown."

The manager speaks the last sentence of the story, and his words ("We will not disturb that crown") not only confirm Sarah Raven's final status but also set a seal on the reaction Phelps offers her readers. Unlike Gilman, although Phelps brooks no dissent, her insistence on unanimous reverence for her protagonist denies her character a sense of realistic individuality. It is not that Sarah Raven is too good to be true, but rather that the series of steps Phelps takes to make her a community icon removes all the elements that functioned to make Sarah a credible, realistic woman. Phelps begins by indicating Sarah's status as a widow who, though still young and attractive enough, is yet free of emotional ties. She goes on to provide a fairly detailed physical description of her that also offers some indication of her character: her expression is "self-possessed, but gentle," and she is "without self-assertion." Life, we are told, "had taught her to disregard herself" (354). All of this is a far cry from the independent, lively Esther who inhabits Gilman's text. Then the speeches of the step-mother and manager (each unnamed) appropriate Sarah as she is first moved out of her role as independent, employed woman, back to that of young bride (complete with resonances of romantic tragedy), and then up to her final position as untouched and untouchable smiling martyr. Sarah's identity thus becomes ever more socially defined and elevated, eventually being subsumed in the position of "Chief Operator," a title that surely carries divine undercurrents, names the story, and is the first label by which we know Sarah Raven. While the result is an affecting and uplifting story, it lacks the rather sardonic realism of Gilman's "An Unnatural Mother," which admits (in both senses) the almost inevitable carping ingratitude of the rescued who resent finding themselves beholden to someone they delighted in looking down upon.

Unlike Phelps's univocal and unequivocal tale, then, Gilman's story keeps in play two entirely contradictory views of Esther and of what being a "natu-

ral mother” might mean. This mirrors the fluctuating way that such actions are regarded: how marvelous to risk one’s own daughter for the sake of so many others; but how could someone desert her baby in the face of such danger—even if, as the story suggests, she thinks her husband has time to reach the house before the dam breaks? While admiring the person who remains rational in an emergency, we still demand an irrational impulse that sends that same person back into danger in a desperate and ill-judged attempt to secure a child already left to someone else to rescue. As a result both the voice that praises and the one that denigrates Esther must be given due weight at the end of the tale, and each is vindicated by Esther’s death. Viewed in this way (and to return to Rose), “An Unnatural Mother” can be seen as an exercise in Gilman’s generation of her “own plot, [her] own symbolic landscape, a highly individual configuration of significance through which [she would] view [her] own experience”—in short, as part of the process of creating her own “personal mythology” (Schwartz 10).

Gilman’s diaries record that “An Unnatural Mother” was written on 17 June 1893, while her daughter Katharine was still living with her and before the scandal of her divorce finally broke—not, however, before she had suffered caustic comment from the press concerning her domestic arrangements, the same press that would soon accuse her in so many words of being “an unnatural mother.” While the early 1890s thus brought her trials, they also included joys, one of which was writing plays with Grace Channing. Much of Gilman’s fictional writing is also dramatic in the sense of being reported through conversations between characters, as is the case in “An Unnatural Mother.” Gilman may have found this mode particularly conducive to her preferred “direct style” since it permits the presentation of several views within one story. If we add to this the experience of co-authoring, which necessarily alerts one to alternative ways of presenting views, we end up with an awareness of the usefulness of multiple voices within a text and the impact of unexplained juxtaposition that we find in Gilman’s gothic stories, and “The Giant Wistaria” (1890) in particular. As a genre, gothic revels in the unexplained and unresolved. Readers are left hanging at the end, unsure of how the plot concludes, or even if it has concluded, and puzzling over some still-tangled mystery at the center of the narrative. It may thus seem an odd choice of mode for a writer who regards her fiction as an effective vehicle for her ideas for social reform, rather than as belletristic literature. On the other hand, what better mode for eliciting a chill at the consequences of current social ills laid bare before the reader? Certainly, Gilman proved herself a successful gothic writer in tales such as “The Rocking Chair” (1891), and we should remember that “The Yellow Wall-Paper” was regarded as a horror

story in its time.⁴ It is even possible to see Gilman returning to the genre late in her career when, in an effort to revive her flagging popularity, she experimented with detective fiction while continuing to engage in explicit social criticism. *Unpunished* unites the crime fiction elements of murder plot and insightful detection with the gothic strands of innocent, imprisoned women, unscrupulous men, marriage used as a means of exploitation, secrets only partly revealed or resolved, and a suggestion of supernatural administering final justice. While such classifications only partly fit that story, "The Giant Wistaria" is clearly a gothic tale and as such provides all the elements of mystery and open-endedness the genre requires.

"The Giant Wistaria" is structured around the partly-told tale of a young woman of (presumably) the 1790s (the high gothic period) who has recently given birth to an illegitimate child. The first short section consists of the exchange between the girl and her parents, during which we learn that she is to be sent back to England, where she will be married off to a brutish cousin, leaving her baby behind in the United States. The second main part of the tale revolves around three young couples who, roughly a century later, rent the house that was the scene of the opening section. These six characters revel in the notion that the house is haunted, and indeed one night three of them witness the ghost of a young woman, bundled up in a shawl. One sees her stooped over a deep well they have found in the cellar, pulling at a chain that disappears into its depths. The next morning the couples discover the remains of a minute corpse in the well-bucket while workmen uncover the skeleton of a young girl in the cellar, caught in the roots of the wisteria that covers the front of the house and gives the story its title.

I am less interested here in the obvious central mystery of how the young woman and her illegitimate child met their deaths than in the elusive question of what we are to make of that giant wisteria. The vine cries out for metaphorical interpretation, but it is less clear what that interpretation should be, as a connection between the vine and the girl is suggested but not elaborated. At the very beginning of the story the young mother is reprimanded by her mother for breaking its tendrils, and we later discover that the creeper was brought from England as a gift to the mother from the girl's father.

"It groweth well, this vine thou broughtest me in the ship, my husband."

"Aye," he broke in bitterly, "and so doth the shame I brought thee! Had I known of it I would sooner have had the ship founder beneath us, and have seen our child cleanly drowned, than live to this end!" (Gilman, "Giant" 39)

Finally this episode concludes with: "Overhead the shadows flickered mock-

ingly across a white face among the leaves, with eyes of wasted fire” (40). A century later the tender vine has become “[a] huge wistaria vine [covering] the whole front of the house,” which has “wrenched” the porch pillars from their places and now holds them “rigid and helpless by [its] tightly wound and knotted arms” (41). The final sentence of the story reveals that it holds not only the pillars: the bones of the young mother are found tangled “in the strangling grasp of the roots” (47).

How are we to interpret this? Is this a patriarchal vine destroying the house that still contains the evidence of the “shame” that sent the family back to England, or is the vine female, wreaking vengeance on the patriarchal, colonial house that consigned both girl and baby to death, ignoring the older mother’s ineffectual half-attempts to help her daughter? The matter is made more complicated by the emphasis on Mrs. Jenny’s affection for the creeper. Jenny is the one who initiates renting the house for the summer, which she is sure is haunted. Her delight in the wisteria means the workmen who have been brought in to make the porch safe are cautioned not to harm the plant that is both holding it up and tearing it down. Susy, her sister, has a slightly less benign view of it: “Just look at this great wistaria trunk crawling up by the steps here! It looks for all the world like a writhing body—cringing—beseeching!” (42). There can be no doubt that the eighteenth-century young woman is to be pitied. Whether she deliberately killed her child, was killed herself, or inadvertently killed them both while trying to escape, it is clear that she was in dire straits, with no help at hand. Her white face, glimpsed among the wisteria leaves, creates a connection with the vine that suggests that the “writhing,” “cringing—beseeching” body that Susy sees belongs to the earlier woman. If we follow this line of thought, we could conclude that Susy is alert to the distress hidden within the creeper, however magnificent it seems. Engaged to Jack, a rather bumptious young reporter, she resents his breezy notion that he will invent a ghost to suit the mansion. Her objection is that he is making fun of the place and its history. The ghost she will not permit to be mocked is a vestige and a reminder of how unwed mothers were treated in what is for Susy the fairly recent past. Her desire to respect the “*real*” ghost (42) suggests that she is aware of how the attitudes of the previous century still stretch out to affect people in later generations. Suddenly it is appropriate that Susy, rather than one of the others, trips over a loose plank on the portico, under which, unbeknownst to them at this point, lie the bones of the young mother.

If the engaged Susy is aware of the malignant side of the wisteria, her married sister, Jenny, sees only its beauty. Yet it is Jenny who hears the rattle of the chain in the well at night, and it is her husband, George, who takes

it upon himself to investigate, after first ensuring that Jenny gets back to sleep, with the help of some bromide. He then discovers the ghost of the girl stooped over the well, pulling at the bucket's chain. We might detect here a sympathy between the recently married pair, who could be assumed to be thinking of starting a family, and the ghost of the unnamed young woman for whom motherhood resulted in tragedy. Perhaps surprisingly it is Jack, the mocking reporter, who has the other vision, this time of the young mother wrapped in a shawl with a bundle (the baby? the valuables?) tucked under her arm as she takes something from the bureau drawers. He willfully provides a totally erroneous back story for this figure, making her "an eloping chambermaid with kleptomania!" (45). The unsympathetic Jack gleefully declares they should all investigate the well in the cellar, maintaining a mocking commentary as Jim and George do the actual work of hauling up the bucket. We never discover what these six latter-day characters make of what they find, but to the reader one conclusion at least is clear: the real ghosts and horror stories are the tales of how previous generations treated those who were very similar to ourselves. We can thus read the final breaking up of the porch as an image of later generations shedding light on the misdeeds of the past, while also wondering what the future may hold for Jenny, Kate, and Susy.

But perhaps such attempts at interpretation are misguided, resulting in over-reading what is essentially a gothic tale, told to entertain. Maybe the most effective response is one that does not seek to decode the wisteria any more than solve the mystery. Instead we could focus on Gilman's evident skill in this particular genre and note how here, too, part of that skill lies in allowing contradictory voices to co-exist right up to the end of the tale and beyond. This kind of writing is far removed from the "clearness" with which I began but is perhaps the "style of [her] own" to which Gilman alludes just after staking her claim to that "clearness and vivacity" (*Living* 285). Although Mary Austin apparently would not allow that Gilman had style, she did acknowledge "distinction," and that distinction lies, I suggest, in the somewhat unexpected existence of diverse voices within Gilman's fiction (326). This diversity creates not quite the "cacophony of language akin to Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia*" that Scharnhorst describes ("Charlotte" 170),⁵ but more an honest, if unwitting, reflection of Gilman's own internalized debates, detectable in the clear voice she customarily employs as she seeks to reclaim for her own reforming agenda the earlier "androcentric" discourse (to use her term) that continues to exist within her own texts. The most obvious example in these stories is the redefinition of the phrase

“unnatural mother” that her plot seeks to enact. Such redefinition has meaning only in a context where Miss Jacobs’s use still has power, and so we become aware that at some level Gilman does think Esther is an unnatural mother, much as she feared she herself was, and she thinks this even though “An Unnatural Mother” declares that it is unquestionably a right and noble deed to desert one’s own child in the interests of serving many others. Likewise, in “The Giant Wistaria” the death of the baby (whether by accident or design) allows us to wonder fleetingly whether in fact it would have been better for all concerned if the dictatorial father’s plan had been followed, leaving the illegitimate child in the care of New Englanders where it could grow up outside the constraints of this old, established family, who would take their views, their shame, and their daughter back to Britain.

In “The Giant Wistaria” and “An Unnatural Mother,” we perceive Gilman forming her own style and forging a literary voice that is less clear-cut than her views on literature lead us to expect. This returns us to Rose’s notion of a “personal mythology,” which, we may recall, is “influenced by one ideology or another.” What is interesting about Gilman’s mythology is that, although she apparently strives for indisputable clarity and a single ideology, she never finally eradicates the cross-currents that seep in from the ideologies she wishes to overthrow. These cross-currents give her fiction the vivacity she also desired as the several levels intertwine and enhance one another. The result is a richer fiction and a more torn one than the emotive and assured voice found in Phelps. For readers, this surely recalls both the wisteria and that famous eponymous yellow wallpaper, which sets the protagonist of that tale wondering “whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately” (Gilman, “Yellow Wall-Paper” 12). The answer is, of course, both.

NOTES

1. This story was originally published in *The Impress* in 1895 under the title “An Unnatural Mother.” Gilman reprinted the story twice. The first version, following *The Impress* text, appears in *The Forerunner* 4.6 (1913): 141–43; the second, expanded version, titled “*The Unnatural Mother*” (emphasis added), appears in *The Forerunner* 7.11 (1916): 281–85. This essay cites the text as reprinted in *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories*, edited by Robert Shulman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), which follows the 1916 version, albeit under the title “An Unnatural Mother.”

2. See Gilman’s *The Man-Made World* (Amherst, NY: Humanity, 2001). The discussion of “Masculine Literature” comprises chapter 5 of this book and first appeared in *The Forerunner* (1910) 1.5: 18–20, in which *The Man-Made World* was serialized under

the title "The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture."

3. I would like to thank Carol Farley Kessler for suggesting this comparison to me and Sue Walker of the Maine Women Writers Collection at the University of New England for supplying a copy of "The Chief Operator" from their library. No direct mention of "The Chief Operator" appears in Gilman's diaries, but she does record with approval reading several of Phelps's novels; see *Diaries* entries for 10 May 1881 (1:54), 1 September 1884 (1:301), and 15 October 1885 (1:339).

4. Julie Bates Dock provides an excellent history of the reception of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in the introduction to her edition of the story. While Dock debunks the notion of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" having been regarded as a ghost story, she does allow that several early critics and reviewers referred to it as a horror story. Dock is clearly right to point out that "ghost story" and "horror story" are not synonymous, but it remains fair to say Gilman's most famous short story contains gothic elements from the wife declared ill and imprisoned in an upper room, to the women who move behind the wall-paper. See Dock 16–20.

5. Although my argument does not depend on Bakhtin's "double-voiced discourse" (in which two voices are "dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other"), readers may be interested to explore both this and Bakhtin's discussion of the emergence of individual ideological consciousness, which he casts in terms of a struggle between "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse" in relation to what follows. See Bakhtin 324 and 342.

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An “Absent Mother”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mag—Marjorie, and the Politics of Maternal Responsibility

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As many scholars have found, Gilman throughout her fiction and nonfiction advocated measures to liberate women from the constant responsibilities of childcare through the creation of “baby-gardens,” where trained professionals could nurture children throughout the day while mothers pursued their professions. Though Gilman’s scenarios of outsourced and specialized childcare were often considered shocking in her own era, they are a testament to her prescience in largely having been actualized today, though Gilman would likely praise some parts of their application and criticize others. More problematic, however, is the idea of long-term maternal separation from a child, which reflects Gilman’s own life in her 1894 choice to send her nine-year-old daughter to live with her ex-husband and his fiancée (also her best friend) so that Gilman could focus on her growing professional opportunities. In her fiction, Gilman was more reluctant to portray such a controversial example of what she saw as maternal sacrifice for “world work.” Nonetheless, a striking instance of such separation occurs in Gilman’s 1912 novel, *Mag—Marjorie*. Related to *Mag—Marjorie* are Gilman’s discussions elsewhere of maternal responsibility and childcare, from her optimistic commentaries on ideal motherhood and “social” parenting (from her well-known 1915 novel *Herland* to her underexamined 1900 manifesto, *Concerning Children*), to her admittedly idealistic and selective representation of motherhood in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins*

Gilman (1935), to other personal writings that are sometimes at odds with such optimism.

In *Mag—Marjorie*, Gilman treats maternal separation from children in ways that both parallel and contrast with her discussions of this issue elsewhere in her oeuvre while underscoring Gilman's own complicated relationship with maternal absenteeism. In doing so, this underdiscussed novel merits further consideration within Gilman's canon, especially in its dialogue with her better known and more unequivocal praise of what she termed "the New Motherhood." Furthermore, Gilman's novel has continued relevance in dramatizing both the fundamental premise of her approach to childcare—that a good mother is, in fact, one who must often be absent in the service of "world work"—and the often-critical popular response to that premise in her own era. Her novel anticipates the recent resurgence of such debate through the media-fueled phenomenon known as the "Mommy Wars" at the turn of the twenty-first century, as well as discussion about whether today's mechanisms for short-term separation live up to the ideal Gilman envisioned. In introducing, if not fully exploring the consequences of, complicated choices about mothering that the heroine makes in *Mag—Marjorie*, Gilman raised questions about the politics of maternal responsibility that are still being debated today.

Gilman published *Mag—Marjorie* serially in *The Forerunner* throughout 1912, a year in which, while continuing her public lecturing, she also published such standard Gilman fare in her self-authored and -published magazine as the satirical essay "Improving on Nature," the utopian sketch "Maidstone Comfort," and "An Innocent Girl," one of her several stories that revised the "fallen woman" archetype. However, Gilman did not reissue this novel separately under her personal Charlton imprint as she did with several other *Forerunner* serializations.¹ *Mag—Marjorie*, a classic example of Gilman's ideologically driven and culturally significant (if not aesthetically meritorious) fiction, intertwines her pervasive theme of redeemed "fallen women" with the ideology of Social Hygiene. That movement, which attempted to eliminate venereal disease by abolishing prostitution, by educating the public on sexual health, and by advocating sexual continence, shared the interest of members of the concurrent eugenics movement in "race betterment." As shown by the existence of the American Social Hygiene Association (led by Harvard President Emeritus Charles W. Eliot), it had widespread support in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1914 Eliot addressed the Association, acknowledging American society's tendency to ignore or deny the problem of sexual vice and its consequences, yet asserting that "[i]n the light of

present knowledge these policies of silence and inaction are no longer justifiable" (Eliot 2). Eliot's vision of the need for frankness about and scientific understanding of this problem aligns him with Gilman's recurrent interest in it, particularly the importance of education in order to foster women's choosing of "fit" (e.g., sexually continent and thus healthy) men as husbands and potential fathers.

In *Mag—Marjorie*, Margaret Wentworth, a sixteen-year-old New England country girl, is seduced and impregnated by unscrupulous medical doctor Dick Armstrong, ten years her senior.² Enter Mary Yale, an independently wealthy social worker in the vein of recurrent character Benigna MacAvelly and other female mentors in Gilman's fiction.³ Miss Yale saves Margaret by fabricating her drowning, taking her abroad and, after the birth of her baby, putting Margaret through nine years of medical school and much cultural refinement in the cities of Europe. The young woman returns to New England triumphant as the esteemed Dr. Margaret Yale, rebuffs the new advances of Dr. Armstrong, who does not recognize the object of his previous conquest, and enjoys the happy ending of marriage to the sympathetic and sexually continent Dr. Henry Newcome. The downside of Gilman's characteristically optimistic narrative is Margaret's relationship with her daughter Dolly (or Dorothea), from whom she separates during her nine years of medical school, leaving her in the care of a loving surrogate family. She sees her daughter only during summer breaks, and even then under the guise of an adopted older sister.⁴ Even at the end of Gilman's novel, when Newcome learns of Dolly's true identity and is willing to accept her as an adopted daughter, whether Margaret will publicly acknowledge her motherhood is uncertain, as she is anxious to establish herself professionally in Boston and thereby be an example to other women. Indeed, while Margaret's separation from her child in order to attend medical school is primarily an answer to Gilman's recurrent question of how mothers can share the burden of child-rearing in order to pursue professions, the heroine's choice (along with their fabricated sisterly relationship) is also the solution Gilman provides here to the stigma of so-called "illegitimate" motherhood.

The novel's treatment of maternal responsibility and absence is especially intriguing in light of Gilman's other creative work on this subject. In her first poetry volume, *In This Our World* (1893), the poem "Baby Love" dramatizes the conflict between public work and childcare responsibilities through the allegorical figures of Mother Life, "hard at work" (1.2) and Baby Love, "very lively, very loud" (1.6), describing how Mother must "set her arm" across Baby's path, and concluding:

Baby Love wept loud and long,
But his mother's arm was strong.
Mother had to work, she said.
Baby Love was put to bed. (1.9–12)

On the other hand, Gilman presents positive examples of short-term maternal separation from children in order to pursue rewarding work in several of her *Forerunner*-era stories, including “A Garden of Babies” (1909) and “Making a Change” (1911), wherein she presents fictionalized versions of the “baby gardens” she advocated in *Concerning Children*. She also asserts that the entrepreneurial heroine of her first novel, *What Diantha Did* (1910), is happily able to work after the birth of her child because of having a “cool, airy nursery” (and nursemaid) in the hotel compound she operates, so she can visit her baby throughout the day (184). In an interesting innovation upon the initial scenario of Gilman’s best-known story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” her 1916 tale “Joan’s Defender” concerns a “broken,” neurasthenic mother exhausted by childcare duties, who in this case is advised by her doctor brother to give up her daughter for a time. Nine-year-old Joan (the same age as Katharine was when Gilman sent her daughter east) is sent to California with her kind uncle, and among his brood of children she blossoms under a regime of physical exercise, unconditional love, and intellectual vigor. Since Joan returns to her parents after “nearly two years” (321) a stronger and far happier child, the tale implies that the separation was deeply beneficial for both mother and daughter. However, none of Gilman’s other published works envision so long-term a relinquishing of one’s child (and, to some degree, its aftermath), so reminiscent of Gilman’s own life, as that presented in *Mag—Marjorie*.

This novel, in its consideration of extended maternal absence, also constitutes a provocative counterpart to Gilman’s manifesto of ideal parenting practices, *Concerning Children*, the next book she wrote after her career-making volume, *Women and Economics* (1898). In 1900 Gilman published *Concerning Children* and settled in Manhattan with her newlywed husband Houghton, where they welcomed Katharine, then fifteen years old, after six years of separation. Indeed, Gilman dedicated this volume to Katharine. In many ways, *Concerning Children* anticipates Gilman’s public debate on motherhood with Swedish feminist Ellen Key (1849–1926). As a “humanist feminist” (though she preferred the term “humanist” alone), Gilman minimized difference between the sexes and emphasized woman’s role as a human being.⁵ Consequently she came to advocate social parenting mechanisms such as baby gardens to allow women to perform “human work” that would

benefit society at large. Author of *Century of the Child* (1909), Key—known as a “female feminist”—instead emphasized sex differences and the feminine role of women, believed motherhood to be women’s highest calling, and advocated state support for mothers and children. Gilman, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, also often referred to motherhood as women’s highest calling (indeed, it is the position of ultimate respect and veneration in her 1915 utopia *Herland*) and sometimes praised Key’s work, such as the latter’s critique of patriarchal marriage. However, she differed with Key on the critical issue of women’s work, celebrating their presence in the public sphere at the same time as Key decried it and elevating the notion of social or surrogate parenting to facilitate that work at the same time as Key advocated the reign of mothers in the private home.⁶

Concerning Children, the fullest expression of Gilman’s theories of good mothering, laid the groundwork for her debate with Key. The text is unfortunately marred by prejudices that indicate Gilman’s sympathies with Progressive-era eugenic thinking, as she favorably contrasts the “stock” value of a “sturdy English baby” to that of a “Fuegian” and asserts, “The progress of humanity must be recorded in living flesh. Unless the child is a more advanced specimen than his father and mother, there is no racial improvement” (4). Furthermore, *Concerning Children* adheres to a distanced, theoretical perspective on parenting, perhaps in a bid to sound as expert and academic as possible for readers while also reducing the potential criticism of those who had lambasted Gilman as an “unnatural mother” in 1894. Indeed, she most often speaks of “the child” in an abstract sense and never admits of her own personal experiences as a parent. However, her discussion of parenting and of child psychology in this text is indeed ahead of its time, as Cynthia J. Davis has observed (“*Concerning*” 110). For example, Gilman stresses that parents obsessed with their children’s blind obedience set their own interests above those of their children. Instead she emphasizes developing the child’s own sense of “judgment and will” (39) and argues, “A human creature is a self-governing intelligence, and the rich years of childhood should be passed in the guarded and gradual exercise of those powers” (40). Also, Gilman champions what would now be called experiential learning in asserting, “What we should do is to help the child to question and find out—teach him [*sic*] to learn, not to believe” (56). Gilman moreover decries corporal punishment, noting that this method teaches children merely to associate the physical abuse received with being detected, and thus not to understand the reasons why a behavior is unacceptable.

Perhaps most presciently, in chapter XIV—“Mothers: Natural, Unnatural”—from *Concerning Children*, Gilman also describes communal childcare

and what she calls “social parenting,” concepts introduced in *Women and Economics*. This chapter contrasts conventional and progressive views of motherhood, confounding notions of the “Natural” in order to champion the so-called “Unnatural Mother’s” liberation, through high-quality childcare, to perform uplifting “world-work.” Of course, the title of this chapter also echoes the term with which Gilman was vilified in the press after her choice to send Katharine to Walter and Grace, and it recalls the title of her 1895 story, “An Unnatural Mother,” that champions a woman who prioritizes her role as a “world worker” over her role as a private mother.⁷ In this chapter of *Concerning Children*, Gilman’s view of outsourced childcare, as well as of the mother’s separation from her child, is unfailingly rosy. She asserts that the proud and loving working mother “is not worried” about her child and knows “no weariness, no anxious uncertainty” (272), for the child is in the hands of well-trained specialists, and she concludes decisively that “this unnatural mother has her child in her own care for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, and during the eight hours of a working day she herself places him [*sic*] in what she knows to be better conditions than her own home could offer” (273). And indeed, her point that high quality childcare will not harm children and may better socialize them or prepare them for school is borne out by current research on childcare.⁸ Nonetheless, Gilman’s vision does not admit of the challenges that do arise in the pursuit of daycare for young children, as current research has also documented: frequent sickness through exposure to other children; the sometimes prohibitive expense; or even the unavailability of a suitable establishment in the first place.⁹

Testifying to Gilman’s abiding concern with this subject, discussion of the benefits of surrogate or social mothering also occurs in Gilman’s well-known utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). In the all-female society of the novel, motherhood is considered the noblest calling, the “highest social service,” one that is in fact disallowed to “those held unfit” (69). Moreover, child-rearing in *Herland* is an expert profession, and young children are assiduously cared for in “baby gardens” by specially trained caregivers. As one of the citizens, Somel, explains to the novel’s narrator, *Herland* visitor Van Jennings, “The care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit. . . . [C]hild-rearing has come to be with us a culture so profoundly studied, practiced with such subtlety and skill, that the more we love our children the less we are willing to trust that process to unskilled hands—even our own” (83). Within the *Herland* system, a new mother enjoys a year of constant contact with her baby, but after that is able to pursue her own profession, though “never far off . . . and her attitude toward the co-mothers, whose child-service was direct and continuous, was lovely to see” (103).

Van, himself a "rational" sociologist, is at first quite skeptical of this scheme, inadvertently illuminating the prejudices of his own society in reacting with "cold horror" to the notion of "[separating] mother and child" (83). However, underscoring this new paradigm of childcare is the conviction that it does not deprive the mother of her baby, but rather enriches both the child and its bond with its mother, as Somel reassures Van: "It is her baby still—it is with her—she has not lost it. But she is not the only one to care for it. There are others whom she knows to be wiser. She knows it because she has studied as they did, practiced as they did, and honors their real superiority" (83). Spending significant time among the children and youth of Herland, Van is eventually fully convinced of the success of this system, acknowledging the pervasive happiness, intelligence, and vigor of the people that it produces: "As I looked into these methods and compared them with our own, my strange uncomfortable sense of race-humility grew apace" (104). His eyes thus opened to the benefits of this scheme, Van ultimately even feels "a crushing pity for [his] own childhood, and for all others that [he] had known" (107).

Such discrepancies between idealized, abstract notions of maternal separation and surrogate parenting and the difficult realities they may engender are amplified when one moves from the short-term separations Gilman theorizes and advocates in works such as *Concerning Children* and *Herland* to the long-term separation from her own daughter that, like her heroine in *Mag—Marjorie*, Gilman chose to make. She had considered transferring Katharine to the care of Walter as early as 1891 but did not do so until May of 1894; as Gilman recalls in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the city of San Francisco, where she had a work opening, was "unsuitable for a child," so she finally sent Katharine (accompanied by her grandfather) east to Walter and Grace, who were married a month later. Gilman asserts that her decision to send Katharine to the latter's father "seemed the right thing to do," adding that "[n]o one suffered from it but myself" and that Katharine thereby received "advantages I could never have given her" (163). However, Gilman confesses that, while writing about this parting thirty years later, "I have to stop typing and cry as I tell about it. There were years, years, when I could never see a mother and child together without crying. . . . I used to make friends with any child I could so as to hold it in my arms for a little" (163–64).

Moreover, though Gilman's autobiography presents her young daughter's acceptance of the arrangement with great equanimity, both Ann J. Lane's and Mary A. Hill's biographies of Gilman, on the strength of first-person interviews with the elderly Katharine herself, argue that the daughter was

deeply and lastingly wounded by her mother's decision to send her to Walter and Grace. Furthermore, Katharine registered resentment toward her mother in an unpublished autobiography and in letters to historian Carl Degler, in which she asserts that she was often raised by others even while living in California, due to her mother's "nervous prostration."¹⁰ These letters contain an account in multiple drafts of the 1894 separation, expressing resentment for being "dumped" on Grace that also surfaced in the Hill and Lane interviews.¹¹

And indeed other materials from Gilman's own life contradict her largely positive representation of sending Katharine to Stetson and Channing—admitting the pain it caused her yet justifying this act in the larger scheme of her life's achievement while assuring readers that her daughter only benefited from this choice. A 3 May 1896 letter from Gilman to Grace Channing Stetson describes how allowing herself to think of Katharine brought on enormous pain; speaking metaphorically, she confessed, "I opened the door a little and looked in. [Might] as well pluck at an amputation! It began to bleed and ached and I hasted [*sic*] and shut it again."¹² Another letter to Houghton in 1898 characterizes Gilman's sense of loneliness, revealingly, as that of a "[w]himpering lost child" (Letter to [George] Houghton Gilman). And an entry in Gilman's diary on 31 December 1900, shortly after Katharine had reunited with her mother and new stepfather in New York, simply reads, "I am happy & content. Houghton—Katharine—Home," and suggests Gilman's pleasure at their proximity after such a long separation (*Abridged Diaries* 212).

Equally important, Gilman's personal writings also reveal how her own relationship with *her* mother, while it did not include extended physical separation, was psychologically distant, as several scholars have noted.¹³ Mary Hill has observed that Gilman bonded with her mother over their reading of sentimental novels, texts that may have informed the sentimentalism with which Gilman sometimes treated motherhood later (60). Nevertheless, Gilman's autobiography recounts in painful detail how, as she and her brother moved beyond babyhood, her mother "increasingly lost touch with [her children], [as] wider and wider grew the gulf between" them, and she asserts her mother's denial of "all expression of affection as far as possible" (*Living* 10). Indeed, Mary Perkins limited herself to caressing and holding the young Charlotte only when she thought her to be asleep. As the adolescent Charlotte's writing talent began to emerge, Mary Perkins again showed her emotional distance from her daughter by dismissing the latter's poetry (*Living* 70), and later, when Gilman suffered separation from her dear friend Martha Luther, she writes that she received no comfort elsewhere, for "[m]y mother

and her half-sister, with whom I lived, were unutterably remote—alien—and out of hearing" (*Living* 80).

In light of these contexts, the choice of Gilman's heroine in *Mag—Marjorie* to separate herself from her daughter is a vexed one on several levels. Most simply, the heroine of Gilman's fourth novel has herself already suffered mother-loss, as an impoverished orphan who was quite literally farmed out to an unsympathetic and grudging aunt at the age of three (an arrangement that recalls less the author's widespread praises for surrogate or shared parenting and more Gilman's own humiliating dependence on the largesse of relatives during her impecunious, migratory childhood). The narrator in the opening pages of the novel laments how Margaret Wentworth has received dysfunctionally little affection, though she has "inherited an appetite for petting, a fierce longing to be held close—close—and called tender names" (17). However, after her "fall" from sexual purity, Margaret quickly forms a loving surrogate-daughter relationship with her mentor Mary Yale. Margaret calls the older woman "Mother," and Gilman writes of Miss Yale that "[f]ew mothers personally enjoy the society of their daughters as much as this world-mother enjoyed her favorite child's companionship" (71). Instances of women serving as surrogate mothers to other women or girls pervade Gilman's fiction, from social problem-themed stories including "Turned" (1911) and "An Innocent Girl" (1912), the latter featuring recurrent mentor Mrs. MacAvelly, to the utopian scenario of *Herland*. The intertextuality of this aspect of *Mag—Marjorie* is thus considerable, as is the literary significance of the maternal as a metaphor throughout Gilman's writing. However, it is also possible to regard Gilman's treatment of this relationship in *Mag—Marjorie* through an autobiographical lens as a remaking of Gilman's mother into the kind of affectionate mentor she craved—and perhaps as a re-visioning of her own complicated relationship with her daughter. Indeed, Gilman uses identical diction in writing of her own life to describe a desire for physical motherly affection like her heroine's. In her autobiography she writes, "Looking back on my uncuddled childhood, it seems to me a sad mistake of my heroic mother to withhold from me the petting I so craved, the sufficing comfort of maternal caresses" (78). And in a letter from Gilman to Katharine written in 1933, she laments, "How children suffer from those who loved them most! I did try so carefully not to hurt you, and to love and pet you as I so longed to be loved and petted and never was" (qtd. in Lane 324).

However, in Gilman's novel it is the young woman's beloved mentor who asserts that she must be parted from her child in order to succeed in remaking her life. Miss Yale argues, "[your daughter] must not know you are

her mother until you are ready to claim her" (55), implying that Margaret must "earn" the right to be a parent. Interestingly, this argument in some ways resembles the Social Hygiene rhetoric Gilman often incorporated in her writings, most notably her 1911 novel *The Crux*, wherein she championed female agency in mate selection so that women could choose as mates sexually continent men who had thus "earned" the right to become fathers. Indeed, Margaret provides a cautionary example for Social Hygiene in the early portion of *Mag—Marjorie*; as she chooses the dissolute Dr. Armstrong as a sexual partner (though admittedly ignorant of such matters, which is another Gilman critique of the sexual double standard), she has not practiced this essential duty and has yet to redeem herself before she is "fit" to be a mother to her child.

As much as Margaret sees the merit of Miss Yale's arguments about what Gilman elsewhere claimed was the first duty of a mother—"to be a mother worth having" ("Our Place Today")—her experience of parting from her daughter is no less agonizing. Gilman writes that, despite Margaret's heart-ache,

She learned, out of her own keen intelligence, what no books could have taught her, how to hold down her grief, and use it as a spur. She rigidly closed her mind to thoughts of her child during the hours of work, and the hours of play. She allowed, however, one period of tender retrospect, before sleeping, letting her mind dwell on that small rosy sweetness her arms so hungered to hold; and then she checked her tears and restocked her armory of patience by the thought that if she really loved her child and wished to serve her, she must simply work. (*Mag—Marjorie* 56)

This pivotal passage not only articulates a philosophy that guided Gilman herself throughout her own life, but also shows how that philosophy particularly bore upon the challenges faced by mothers who wished to prioritize their role as "world workers." More mundanely, Gilman's allowing her heroine to long for her baby at bedtime recalls aspects of Gilman's autobiography: for example, Gilman wrote of how she learned to restrain the active imagination that her mother so disparaged by restricting it to musings each night in bed after story reading (*Living* 20). Also, Margaret's allowing herself periods of "tender retrospect" about her child only in the moments before sleep recalls Mary Perkins's similar curtailing of the young Charlotte's moments of physical affection with her mother. More fundamentally, this passage suggests practices of denial and repression that Gilman herself engaged in to avoid painful thoughts about her daughter. As she wrote to Grace Chan-

ning Stetson a little over a year after relinquishing Katharine to the latter's care, "I [*sic*] gladdens my heart to have the steady good news of Katharine. I find I grow more sensitive about her, rather than less. Sometimes it aches. But I try to hold the right attitude [*sic*] unflinchingly" (16 Sept. 1895; Gilman, *Selected Letters* 96). A year and a half later, in another letter to Grace lamenting the pain that the separation caused her, she writes,

This won't do. I can't afford to ache. Dear, I think if you could see how patiently I try to carry my patched and cracked and leaky vessel of life—how I pray endlessly for strength to do my work!—only that—how I use what strength I have, when I have any, to hold the attitude and do the things which to me seem right, how I have truly and fully accepted the not-having—O well, there!—We all do what we can. (11 Jan. 1897; *Selected Letters* 100)

And as she wrote to Houghton on 1 October 1897, "to keep open and thrillingly responsive to *the thought of her* [Katharine] would be, to my temperament, death. Or a mind unhinged. I cannot bear any more leaks and losses and pains" (Gilman, *Journey* 104). Finally, Margaret's resolution at the close of this passage in *Mag—Marjorie* "that she must simply *work*" (emphasis mine) underscores the enduring appeal that the notion of redeeming labor held for the author. Indeed, it would not be an overestimation to say that finding and performing world-improving work, for Gilman, was the good that trumped all others, no matter the cost.

While these aspects of the novel thus make it a paradoxical reflection of both the optimistic theoretical visions of maternal separation Gilman publicly articulated elsewhere and the inward pain that Gilman's separation from her child caused her, other aspects of *Mag—Marjorie* instead assert contrast between Gilman's experiences as a parent and her fictive treatment of motherhood here. For example, the novel's depiction of the practice of co-mothering manifests sharp distinctions between fiction and the reality of Gilman's life. The novel's rosy picture of the kind co-mother to Dorothea, a young widow named Julie who lives in the Swiss Alps, is in line with Gilman's usually felicitous visions of surrogate parenting in her fiction, asserting that Margaret's "mind was easy about the child, though her heart ached steadily. She knew that 'Aunt Julie' was as good to little Dorothea as to her own boy, only a year older; that both children had the loving care of wise grandparents; that the place was ideal for happy and healthy childhood" (56). In a similar vein, a lecture that Gilman gave in 1914 titled "Wider Motherhood" provided an idealistic parable of a mother who, disliking small children, let her sister raise her offspring until they were ten years old, visiting them from time to

time, after which she took them back into her own home with no adverse consequences. However, in Gilman's own life, her co-mothering of Katharine with Grace Channing Stetson indeed bred tension and resentment on the part of the latter, who put her own writing aspirations on hold to fulfill that role. Stetson published a story in 1907 in *Harper's Monthly* (interestingly, under her maiden name) titled "The Children of the Barren," which presented critically a couple who chose to leave their two oldest children with a childless relative so that they could travel.¹⁴

Further evidence that Gilman's treatment of Margaret's separation from her daughter in *Mag—Marjorie* may be both a reflection of and a conscious divergence from her own complicated history of separation from Katharine lies in the novel's depiction of their reunion. As if in an attempt to reverse Gilman's own history, Margaret is finally reunited with Dolly when the latter is nine years old, the same age that Katharine was when Gilman's divorce from Walter was finalized and she sent her daughter to Walter and Grace (and the same age that Gilman herself was when her parents formally separated, in another resonance of emotional loss that this particular age held for her). However, the long-anticipated reunion between young Dolly and the woman she knows only as her "sister" is anticlimactic. Indeed, Margaret suffers the pangs of watching Dolly express more affection to Miss Yale than to herself, and she vows to "[lay] siege to the child's heart" (93). Moreover, Margaret's dedication to the "bittersweet campaign . . . [of] the wooing of her own child's heart" (113) again recalls Gilman's own confession to Houghton in an 1899 letter that she was "secretly wooing her child" (10 Nov. 1899; *Journey* 310). And as with Dolly's hesitance to warm up to her mysteriously affectionate "sister" in the novel, Gilman suffered Katharine's sometimes less-than-ready affections after several years of separation with only intermittent visits. When Katharine entered her middle adolescence, Gilman grew interested in having her daughter live with her again, but Katharine was ambivalent, preferring the opportunities that traveling in Europe with her father offered to living in New York with her mother (Lane 317–18). In Gilman's novel, Margaret even attempts to win over her daughter with "loving gifts" (89), the principal one of which is a wristwatch. Ironically, this object connotes the Progressive Era's coveted values of self-discipline, time management, and efficiency that allowed Margaret to become a successful doctor, at the price of that maternal separation. The desire to foster closeness with a child toward whom one feels guilt through giving gifts or money would resurface in Gilman's life as well; when she began sending checks to the adult Katharine and her impecunious husband, an accompanying 1921 letter laments, "There has been so much, so very much, that I failed in giving you, dear child," asserting that the enclosed

money is "not even a gift—it is a mother's due, long over due!" (28 April 1921; *Selected Letters* 141).

Such parallels between the events and themes of *Mag—Marjorie* and Gilman's own life notwithstanding, a major distinction between them is even more provocative. Namely, while it appears that Gilman's heroine in *Mag—Marjorie* does finally secure her daughter's love, if within the fabricated relationship of sisterhood, the end of the novel leaves unclear whether Margaret will acknowledge Dolly as her daughter. Gilman elects not to give us the expected scene of bittersweet reconciliation between revealed mother and child but instead chooses to end the novel with Margaret's romantic union with the sympathetic Dr. Newcome. The concluding scene, in which he proposes marriage to Margaret, focuses on Margaret's shame at her past "sin" and Newcome's gallant dismissal of it, offering her the option of continuing her artifice: "Now I, being honored above all men, marry a lovely young widow. We have Dolly with us, but we keep the status quo—for her sake, if you choose. If not—just as you decide" (147). This lack of resolution to the novel's greatest conflict is as striking as Gilman's utter silence about her own parenting experiences that one observes in *Concerning Children*, with the latter's rigorous adherence to an impersonal, quasi-scientific perspective. If, as Gilman claimed in her essay "The New Generation of Women" (1923), "women are first, last, and always mothers" (288), echoing her many assertions elsewhere of the importance of motherhood, why does Gilman conclude *Mag—Marjorie* by emphasizing Margaret's identity as romantic partner rather than as mother? It would seem that the heroine's struggle to succeed professionally at the cost of separating from her child would have presented a greater challenge than that of finding an appropriate suitor. Furthermore, Gilman's avoidance of what would likely be a sentimental scene is perplexing in light of her tendency to employ sentimentalism in her treatment of motherhood, as Monika Elbert has noted (106).

Perhaps an explanation for Gilman's surprising choice to privilege the romantic over the maternal in the novel's conclusion lies partly in her own relationship with Houghton, the romantic partner she finally found who supported her public aspirations wholeheartedly. During a vacation taken with Katharine in the summer of 1898, Gilman admitted in a letter to her then-suitor that she loved, yet also resented, the girl's presence, as it seemed to take away from Houghton's preeminence in her heart (Letter to Houghton Gilman, 21 June 1898; *Journey* 160). And indeed, her letter to him of 12 March 1899 states conclusively, "As far as personal happiness goes you are more to me than my child—far more" (*Journey* 249). On the other hand,

having created so delusive a scenario between mother and daughter in this novel, one wonders whether Gilman, who often subordinated fictive or aesthetic development to ideological purpose, was simply unwilling to portray the difficult emotions Dolly would realistically feel upon learning the truth about her mother—or, equally importantly, the public censure Margaret might consequently receive as an “unnatural mother,” as Gilman herself had experienced upon relinquishing Katharine. Despite the unabashed ideological intent behind so many of Gilman’s optimistic and neatly resolved fictional conclusions—including those of her many tales championing innovative parenting and childcare arrangements—the curious close of this novel, in the lack of resolution of its most conflicted and personal issue, is the strongest testament of its connection to Gilman’s own complicated experiences as a mother. Gilman not only theoretically reenvisioned how child-rearing could occur, but also in her own life exemplified alternative childcare arrangements that were controversial in their time. *Mag—Marjorie*, situated in a fictive middle ground that borrows both from Gilman’s theoretical discussions on parenting and her own lived experiences, raises important questions about society’s expectations about motherhood that nonetheless had no simple answers.

Finally, while this novel’s scenario of extended maternal absenteeism is indeed a choice that many mothers of young children today would not enter into lightly, *Mag—Marjorie* more generally encourages us to consider how the censures that Gilman received for her then-radical visions of maternal separation, even in the short rather than long term, still persist. Workers today who can afford them have many childcare options available; indeed, countless women, including unmarried ones, can pursue such goals as a medical degree, as the heroine of Gilman’s novel did, without having to send their children off to the care of others for months at a time. But in addition to the real challenges (high costs, lack of availability, higher frequency of communicable illness) that can arise to blunt Gilman’s rosy visions of baby gardens, our culture still pressures many working mothers to question themselves inwardly and to defend themselves outwardly about even workday absence from their children (especially preschool-age children). Many women today face the same challenge that Mary A. Hill interprets as existing in Gilman’s own life: “Taught from childhood to accept ‘feminine’ self-abnegation, to ‘love’ in dependent and self-denying ways, women find it hard to respect themselves, much less to recognize, accept, and respect authenticity and purpose in their work” (*Journey* 14). This challenge often becomes all the more fraught when the cost of that work is outsourcing the care of one’s children.

Some consider the recent so-called “Mommy Wars” in America at the

turn of the twenty-first century a phenomenon fabricated by the media—the tension between mothers caring for children at home and those pursuing careers, as manifested in countless talk show segments, news articles, and books.¹⁵ These “Wars” are often voiced in oppositional discourse that Gilman anticipated with precision one hundred years ago in the debate between “natural” and “unnatural” mothers that she traced in *Concerning Children*. Whether this phenomenon is simply a media myth (or reflection of the socio-political climate of the turn into the twentieth century) or not, many women in the midst of raising children today and making difficult decisions about when to remain at home or continue a career would admit that the issues this debate raises are all too real, and they indeed reiterate the cultural debate that Gilman engaged in at the turn of the previous century.

In utopian works such as *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916), Gilman masterfully employed the construct of a visitor or visitors from another context to put the social problems of her own milieu into a fresh perspective. If Gilman could have traveled to the future to visit United States society at the start of the twenty-first century, she would likely be glad to see that the pervasive, if often expensive, availability of childcare today would allow a modern-day Margaret Wentworth to pursue a professional dream without prolonged separation from her child (although, as one who advocated men’s “equalizing up” to what she saw as the higher sexual standards of women at the turn of the century and who decried the growing female “sex expression” of the 1920s, Gilman might arguably be more uncomfortable with today’s decreasing stigma over unmarried motherhood). On the other hand, Gilman would also likely criticize the lack of training, low pay, and lack of societal respect for many childcare providers today, as she envisioned these workers as “high-grade, well-paid expert attendants and instructors” able to provide “the most gentle and exquisite training . . . education more valuable than that received in college” (*Concerning Children* 127). But more significantly, as works like *Mag—Marjorie* suggest, in confronting (if not always resolving comfortably) the difficulties of how to balance work and motherhood, Gilman would likely be unpleasantly surprised to find women in the twenty-first century often facing the same challenges that she sought so earnestly to overcome.

NOTES

1. Gilman developed *Mag—Marjorie* from a brief play entitled “The Balsam Fir,” which she had written earlier. I thank Cynthia J. Davis, Denise D. Knight, and Jennifer

S. Tuttle for generously sharing resources and providing feedback during the writing of this essay.

2. Akin to the predicament Gilman scholars face in how to refer to the author, who at various points in her life carried the surnames of Perkins, Stetson, and Gilman (I refer to her by her final surname, under which she published *Mag—Marjorie*), the protagonist of this novel is variously called “Mag,” “Maggie,” “Marguerite,” “Margaret,” and finally “Marjorie” throughout her evolution. To avoid confusion, I refer to her throughout this discussion as “Margaret,” which she is called for most of the novel.

3. Benigna MacAvelly is the heroine of Gilman’s 1914 novel *Benigna Machiavelli*; a “Benigna MacAvelly” or “Mrs. MacAvelly” also appears as a mentor to the female protagonists in five of Gilman’s *Forerunner* stories, “According to Solomon” (*Forerunner* 1.2 [Dec. 1909]: 1–5), “Martha’s Mother” (*Forerunner* 1.6 [Apr. 1910]: 1–6), “Mrs. Potter and the Clay Club” (*Forerunner* 2.2 [Feb. 1911]: 31–36), “An Innocent Girl” (1912), and “Maidstone Comfort” (1912).

4. Gilman thus presents a scenario analogous to the subterfuge Charlotte Lovell must employ for her “niece” Tina in Edith Wharton’s novella “The Old Maid (The ‘Fifties)” (1922, 1924) in Wharton, *Novellas and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1990): 371–444.

5. For example, in her February 1913 *Forerunner* essay “On Ellen Key and the Woman Movement,” Gilman asserts, “Now I am not primarily ‘a feminist,’ but a humanist. My interest in the position of woman, in the child, in the home is altogether with a view to their influence upon human life, happiness, and progress” (235).

6. For more on Gilman’s praises for and differences of opinion with Ellen Key on motherhood, see “On Ellen Key and the Woman Movement” as well as Gilman’s October 1913 *Forerunner* essay, “Education for Motherhood” (See *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*, edited by Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 239–47).

7. Perhaps in a testament to the story’s significance for Gilman, “An Unnatural Mother,” reprinted in the June 1913 *Forerunner*, was expanded as “The Unnatural Mother” in the November 1916 *Forerunner*.

8. See McCartney 2 and “Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance, and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months” (The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, *Child Development* 69.4 [Aug. 1998]: 1145–70) for current findings on the effects of high quality childcare.

9. See McCartney 3 for further discussion of these detrimental aspects of daycare.

10. The unpublished autobiography and letters to Degler are in Walter Stetson Chamberlin’s private collection in Los Alamos, NM. I am indebted to Cynthia J. Davis for sharing this information with me.

11. See Hill 232–37 and Lane 310–12 for discussions of the authors’ interviews with Katharine Stetson Chamberlin.

12. Gilman, *Selected Letters* 97. Other letters are hereafter cited parenthetically from this edition, with the exception of those cited parenthetically from *A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897–1900*, ed. Mary A. Hill.

13. For example, see Lane 38–39 and Ammons 42–43 for discussions of Gilman’s relationship with her own mother.

14. I thank Cynthia J. Davis for alerting me to this story.

15. This debate and the term "Mommy Wars" goes back as far as the late 1990s; for example, see Tracy Thompson's "A War Inside Your Head" in *The Washington Post Magazine* (15 Feb. 1998): W12. Other notable articles on the issue include Lisa Belkin's "The Opt-Out Revolution" in *The New York Times Magazine* (26 Oct. 2003, Section 6): 42, 44–46, 85–86, and Louise Story's "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood" in the *New York Times* (20 Sept. 2005): A1, A18. The debate has produced several books, including Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels's *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Caitlin Flanagan's *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006); Miriam Peskowitz's *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005); Leslie Morgan Steiner's *The Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* (New York: Random House, 2006); and Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

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Turning “The Balsam Fir” into *Mag—Marjorie*

Generic Transposition in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Imaginative Economy

FREDERICK WEGENER

Few of the American literary women whose work has been resurrected over the past four decades went as far out of their way to discount the aesthetic value of their own writing as Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Looking back on a remarkably prolific and fertile career, Gilman made a point of belittling “such small sense of art as I have,” differentiated herself from “those who write as artists, real ones,” and declared that she was “[n]ot aiming in the least at literary virtuosity” anywhere in her capacious work (*Living* 6, 304, 308). According to her recollections, “Such writing as I have done . . . was easy work,” involved “easy and swift expression,” and “is not, in the artistic sense, ‘literature.’ I have never made any pretense of being literary” (*Living* 284, 103, 284). Scholars, for the most part, have been content to follow such disclaimers, treating Gilman’s thought in isolation from the imaginative modes or structures through which she often formulates it. According to Carol Farley Kessler, for example, “Gilman’s verse is to be valued not so much for its belletristic merit as for its social critique” (“Brittle” 134), thereby ascribed an instrumentalism that has similarly deflected critical analysis from most of her fiction. As Polly Wynn Allen remarks, “Gilman did not agonize over the writing of her realistic short stories and novels” but “wrote them casually, almost in sport,” having “planted her feminist

ideas in fictional gardens, the artistic quality of which was only an incidental concern” (145). Little indeed has changed in Gilman scholarship since Christopher P. Wilson tried focusing attention, some time ago, on what he called “Gilman’s often-neglected literary skills,” observing that “few of even her devoted critics have, as yet, gone so far as to credit Gilman with being a self-conscious literary craftsperson” (173).

Even before she launched, with *The Forerunner* in 1909, an entirely self-authored monthly journal—of which “[e]ach issue included one instalment of a novel, also of a [nonfiction] book published serially; a short story, articles of various length; poems, verses, allegories, humor and nonsense, with book reviews and comment on current events” (*Living* 305), not to mention the occasional chamber play—Gilman’s writing had grown too variegated and multifarious to be regarded as the product of a purely facile or pragmatic talent. Nowhere is its range more apparent than in the sheer number of different forms employed by Gilman, who clearly “expected her readers to move between a multiplicity of genres” (Beer 148) while navigating through her output. For the claim that “much of [her] originality” as “an . . . artist” is attributable to “the way in which she handles genre” (Beer 151), or that “Gilman’s relationship to generic forms was a complex one deserving further critical attention” (Gough and Rudd 6), perhaps the best evidence may be found in the subset of no fewer than three texts initially composed in one mode but soon rewritten in another within a five-year period that began not long before Gilman started *The Forerunner*.

Her two versions of “Three Women”—published first as a short story (1908) and then as a play (1911)—clearly illustrate Gilman’s readiness to undo or do over her work in searching for a form best suited to expressing her most cherished themes, in this case “the dilemma based on the choice to be made by a woman between marriage and career” (Cockin 81). Having thus converted a story into a dramatic work, she reversed the procedure shortly afterwards with “Interrupted,” an unpublished play drafted in 1909 on a similar theme and then expanded, as Kessler observes (*Charlotte* 37), into the novel *Won Over* (1913). With each pair of texts, Gilman undertook an exercise in what Gérard Genette has termed “intermodal transmodalization,” entailing “the shift from the narrative to the dramatic, or *dramatization*, and . . . from the dramatic to the narrative, or *narrativization*” (284, 277–78). Such intricate maneuvers on her part might well be taken to reflect a more sophisticated formal and generic understanding than is usually associated with Gilman’s work. Yet even when it has been examined, as in the case of her reworking of “Three Women,” which “shows her awareness of dramatic conventions . . . and a definite talent for dramatic presentation”

(Farr 100), the one treatment of both versions follows the critical consensus on her didacticism in remarking that "Gilman was aware of the efficacy of using dramatic form to embody her ideas for social improvement" and that "she used both fiction and drama to embody her ideas" (94).

Artfulness is not as easily subordinated in analyzing the most substantial of Gilman's cross-genre transpositions, which she executed in between her recyclings of "Three Women" and "Interrupted." As Kessler alone has again noted, Gilman based her novel *Mag—Marjorie*, serialized in *The Forerunner* in 1912, on another play that was never published, "The Balsam Fir," evidently completed by 1910. Involving "a fallen woman whose reputation is restored" and who "is rewarded by a successful medical career and marriage" (Kessler, *Charlotte* 37), *Mag—Marjorie* essentially reimagines the scenario dramatized in "The Balsam Fir" in ways that evince a real canniness on Gilman's part in recognizing the superior advantages of prose narrative for the task of telling such an unusual heroine's complex and many-branched story. Tracing the compositional process through which a text originally conceived in dramatic form became a novel offers a rare glimpse into Gilman's workshop, further helping dispel what Alfred Bendixen has called "the currently overly simplistic picture of this writer" (161).

Beginning in the middle of a picnic "on the top of a rounded ridge, in New Hampshire," the first act of "The Balsam Fir" introduces all of Gilman's chief characters, among them Mary Yale, "a Boston woman, unmarried, about forty-five" and "rich, opinionative, independent"; the Rev. Edward and Mrs. Laura Briggs (the latter described as "[o]ld friend and schoolmate of Miss Yale" and "very conservative and domineering"); their daughter Daisy, "a sweet, pleasant, inoffensive nice young girl"; Dr. John Armstrong, "[a]n eminent gynecologist"; and Dr. Henry Newcomb, "[a]n efficient physician" ("Balsam" n.p.).¹ As the picnic disbands and Mrs. Briggs remarks that "it is really a pleasant place" but says she "wish[es] Mrs. Haskins," the proprietor of the boarding-house where they are staying, "would be a little more—genial with her boarders," Miss Yale exclaims, "I wish she'd be a little more genial with her niece!"—referring to Margaret Hudson, "a girl of sixteen, awkward, undeveloped, not very pretty, red-haired, freckled, ill-bred" (I, 4; n.p.). As Mrs. Briggs observes, "You take an interest in every lame dog you come across," charging Miss Yale with having "adopt[ed] vagabond children by the dozen" (I, 5–6).

Mrs. Briggs also claims to have spotted "Maggie Hudson" clandestinely meeting with Dr. Armstrong, who is later rebuked first by Miss Yale and then by Dr. Newcomb about his dalliance with the young girl. Once they exit, he encounters Maggie, who learns that he is departing soon, whispers to him

that she is pregnant, and is humiliated after a startled Armstrong promises to take care of her financially but without proposing marriage. Left alone on stage disconsolately sobbing, Maggie is approached by Miss Yale, who infers what has happened, comforts her, rallies her spirits by declaring that she can study to become a doctor herself, and then offers to send her abroad, help her through her pregnancy, subsidize her education, and “adopt” her by giving Maggie her own surname.

The second and third acts shift the action, ten years later, to a “camp” in the Adirondacks, where the Briggs family, Dr. Armstrong, and Dr. Newcomb have regathered, along with “Dolly Yale,” a nine-year-old child adopted by Miss Yale and left with Mrs. Briggs for the summer. All of them await Miss Yale’s arrival from Europe with a woman described as “her wonderful protege [*sic*],” a “young doctor” who turns out to be Maggie, now unrecognizable as Margaret Yale, “a taller, fuller developed woman, handsome and athletic” and “[h]ighly educated and traveled” (II, 4, 2; n.p.). Inordinately affectionate in greeting Dolly, who is in fact secretly her daughter (the offspring of her summer liaison with Dr. Armstrong), Margaret is then reintroduced to her seducer without warning, as if they’ve never met, at the end of Act II.

Halfway into the next act, on stage with him for the first time since their parting encounter in Act I, a guarded Margaret then finds herself bantering alone with Armstrong, who is obviously dazzled and smitten—increasingly so, as he asks her to marry him by the middle of Act IV, set in Miss Yale’s home in Boston three months later. Staggered by her revelation that she is an unmarried mother, Armstrong suddenly realizes that Margaret Yale is in fact Maggie Hudson and that Dolly is their child, further arguing that she can give their daughter “a home—a name” by marrying him (III, 8). Rejecting his offer and contemptuously dismissing him, Margaret is then joined in the play’s final scene by Dr. Newcomb, who has already expressed his admiration in Act III, during their one previous tête-à-tête, and who now makes a dual proposition: first, that she combine her medical practice with his and, second, as he abruptly declares his love for her, that they marry. Gratefully accepting Newcomb’s first proposal, Margaret is taken unawares by the other, as she “regards him with widening eyes” and “burst[s] into wild sobs,” compelled to admit, “I am not fit! I cannot marry you! I have—sinned” (IV, 16, 17). The curtain falls as Newcomb “takes her in his arms” while confessing, “So have I!” (IV, 17).

As the story of a young girl impregnated and abandoned by an older male predator, but reclaimed through her transformation into a professionally successful woman (rather than perishing, with her illegitimate child, in the time-honored fashion), “The Balsam Fir” mixes the conventionally sen-

timental with the ideologically heterodox in a way that did not discourage Gilman from attempting to get the play staged. Although not an inexperienced dramatic writer, having collaborated on several plays with her friend Grace Channing many years earlier, Gilman seems to have been convinced of its weaknesses by the influential drama critic William Archer. When he evaluated it for a literary/dramatic agency in 1910, Archer found that "The Balsam Fir" committed "various technical errors" and generated "little in the way of strong dramatic effect" (1). Striking him as "rather thin in texture" (1), the play indeed constitutes a sort of skeleton on which Gilman put mass and muscle when she decided, within the following two years, that her protagonist's story lent itself more readily to novelistic than to theatrical representation. In the course of incorporating "The Balsam Fir," *Mag—Marjorie* undertakes an enlargement upon the play's central themes, a deepening of its portrayal of various characters, and an exfoliation of its premise into the sort of young woman's unconventional coming-of-age story in which Gilman increasingly excelled once she turned to novel-writing as she entered the *Forerunner* years.

For the most part, Gilman's dialogue in "The Balsam Fir" is transferred to the novel, often emended with small but more than perfunctory changes, however, involving the deletion or addition of short phrases or sentences. Many of the play's stage directions are converted, frequently verbatim, into passages of expository prose that help Gilman advance the narrative by reporting the characters' actions. More consequential are the structural rearrangements and augmentations undergone by Gilman's play as it evolved into a novel. The action with which "The Balsam Fir" begins, for example, doesn't transpire until well into the second chapter of *Mag—Marjorie*; and the confrontation in the middle of Act I between Dr. Newcome, as his name is spelled in the novel, and Dr. Richard (rather than John) Armstrong over a renamed Maggie Wentworth is relocated in the novel to conclude a first chapter that introduces the characters who will form its peculiar love triangle. In Gilman's most expansive change, the gap of ten years that separates the play's first act (whose ending coincides with that of chapter two) from its second is bridged by several chapters in which Maggie's fortunes after she disappears from home are narrated before the novel resumes the action of the play in chapter seven. It is in those chapters—spanning "the mind building" experienced by Maggie overseas and "her ten years . . . of education, the years of study, research and practice" (*Mag* 50, 70)—that the melodramatic seduction-and-redemption tale inherited from "The Balsam Fir" metamorphoses into Gilman's fullest attempt at a female Bildungsroman. Long before "the contemporary narrative of female development exemplifie[d]," as Rita

Felski observes, “an appropriation and reworking of established literary genres” (122) that coincided with second-wave feminism, Gilman performed just such an operation, in other words, on a traditionally male form more amenable than staged drama in its capacity to encompass the process of a young woman’s self-(re)making.

Equally notable is the way that Gilman richly embellished her depiction of various characters as “The Balsam Fir” grew into *Mag—Marjorie*, clarifying the roots of the actions dramatized in the play. In particular, the novel goes much further in elucidating the samaritan humanitarianism of Mary Yale, “a woman of wide and varied experience in mending broken lives, from the placing of hoary inebriates in asylums to the rescue of starved babies from incompetent parents” (*Mag* 37). Moreover, Miss Yale “had friends similarly interested in more than one country,” where “[h]er own life of travel and wide interest in human improvement had put her in touch with all manner of progressive doers and thinkers” who help make it possible for her to extricate Maggie from her situation (37, 57). After largely echoing Miss Yale’s pledge to her at the end of Act I (“I’ll send someone for you—you shall go abroad—I’ll give you my name. I’ll take care of you—and yours! You shall start clear in another country—and make good!” [“Balsam” I, 17; *Mag* 36–37]), the novel dwells at considerable length, in its third chapter, on her orchestration of that escape, which is omitted from the play. In the process, Miss Yale becomes the very guardian whom Maggie requires if she is to evade the sort of androcentric ostracism that inevitably awaits a young woman in her predicament.

As explained to Maggie, Miss Yale’s scheme is first “to get you out of here without anyone’s knowing it,” then “to get you adopted without anyone’s knowing it’s you—ever,” then “to keep you in health and peace of mind until the baby comes,” and finally “to educate you” (39, 40). Once escorted out of New Hampshire to Montreal and then to Europe in the fourth chapter, Maggie—who now begins to be referred to either as “Marguerite” or as “Margaret Yale”—“applied her mind to physical development as well as mental,” benefiting from the kind of “physical culture work” that her creator later numbered “[a]mong the many splendid movements of the late nineteenth century,” one in which Gilman famously took “a life-long interest” (*Mag* 57; *Living* 64, 29). Yet it is on Maggie’s “mental development” in Europe, unsurprisingly, that the fourth chapter principally focuses, representing the last stage of Miss Yale’s plans for her. At this point, Gilman introduces a new set of characters, as Margaret is lodged “as a pupil and boarder” with “a family in a remote Alpine valley,” the husband and wife both among the “progressive doers and thinkers” in Miss Yale’s international circle of friends

(53, 57). Leaving her daughter with them a year after Dolly is born, Margaret flourishes at a school to which Miss Yale then sends her in Germany, where her studies are again enhanced by her good luck in "finding a home with a widow of limited means, but unlimited ideals, a lady in whose parlors Marguerite met men and women who thought and taught and wrote to help the world" (57). Thanks to such influences, combined with the kind of formal training she receives, Margaret in Heidelberg "knew what was necessary for her to know, did not know much that was unnecessary, and realized the need of such elimination and concentration in the study of science" (56).

As with her education generally, the importance of the subject on which it becomes centered is considerably amplified in the novel, making it "Gilman's major . . . contribution to the voluminous literature on women doctors between the Civil War and the First World War" (Wegener 67), a period that coincided with the advent of women in medicine in the United States. The special role envisioned for medically trained women by their proponents since the middle of the nineteenth century is hardly mentioned in "The Balsam Fir," apart from an exchange (virtually duplicated in *Mag—Marjorie*) in its final scene, in which Newcomb/e remarks to Margaret, "You women doctors have done a lot to help the other women out of their foolishness," and she agrees in observing that "a woman will often speak more sincerely and freely to another woman" ("Balsam" IV, 13; *Mag* 141). Once Miss Yale learns in the play's first act how Maggie has been mistreated by Armstrong, her entreaties, reproduced in the novel ("You can study, take a profession, be a doctor, if you like, be a better one than he is! Get ahead of him in his own line, wouldn't you like that?" [36]), initially propose such a field of endeavor as an opportunity more for revenge or victory, it seems, than anything else. Adding weight and substance to her advice as she further counsels Maggie in the novel, Miss Yale enunciates another of the original arguments in favor of educating and training women as physicians: "You'll be able to save life—that is, if you choose medicine—to heal the sick, to help women and children . . ." (52). By the time Maggie is persuaded by her benefactress ("You can trust me! I won't fail! I'll do just as you want me to. I'll be a doctor. I'll be a good one!" [55]), Gilman has signaled far more overtly than in her play "the centrality of women doctors in the lives of women," and the unique value that she attached to "the figure of the woman doctor" as "a prototype of . . . the 'New Woman,' independently employed and usefully occupied" (Wegener 59, 56).

The encouragement and guidance that Maggie receives along the way are connected to yet another of Miss Yale's underlying purposes, indicated in Act I of the play (with essentially the same wording in the novel's second chapter)

when she announces, after suggesting that Maggie become a doctor, “I want you to be an example. . . . Yes, an example! To all the others!—Maggie, my dear, you are not the only poor girl who is left crying tonight!” (“Balsam” I, 17; *Mag* 36). Otherwise unarticulated in “The Balsam Fir,” this larger purpose of hers in assisting Maggie, and of Gilman’s in telling such a story, is more fully expressed in *Mag—Marjorie*, in which Miss Yale “had fixed her determined mind on the difficulties confronting this misguided child as a type of world-old injustice, an injustice which she was sure could be remedied” (*Mag* 50). That a young woman can not only survive the trauma endured by Maggie at the hands of an unscrupulous older man but actually prevail in going on to enjoy a contented, productive life—the argument of stories like “An Honest Woman” and “Turned,” both published a year earlier—is what Gilman strives to demonstrate more extensively through Miss Yale’s intervention. “And *always* remember this, my dear,” she beseeches Maggie, “when everything else fails. . . . [T]he big thing to remember is—the other women! The principle of the thing, Maggie! You are working to establish a principle” (53).

As such beliefs are inculcated in her, and as Maggie grows and learns under Miss Yale’s sponsorship, *Mag—Marjorie* extends the sort of “formula” applied on a smaller scale both in its antecedent and elsewhere in Gilman’s imaginative writing, whereby a young girl “endangered by an innocence that does not protect her from a cruel libertine” is then “offered the model of an older woman . . . who presents her with options she never knew existed and knowledge she did not have” (Lane xv). In fulfilling the standard Gilmanian role of an unworldly younger woman’s redemptive mentor, Miss Yale assumes another related function more pronounced in the novel than in “The Balsam Fir.” Gradually, as the orphaned Margaret begins her medical studies in Europe, “Miss Yale . . . developed a pride that was almost maternal” (*Mag* 58), an aspect of their attachment only hinted at in the play. Referred to by the adult Margaret in the novel as “my more-than-mother!” (147), and addressed twice as “Mother-friend” (71, 72) rather than merely as “Mother dear!” in “The Balsam Fir” (IV, 6), her patron becomes the sort of unmarried, biologically childless middle-aged woman often assigned a more universally “mothering” role in Gilman’s vision: “Miss Yale loved her as she had once hoped to love children of her own, with a deep congenial friendship which would have drawn them together if there had been no other tie. . . . Few mothers personally enjoy the society of their daughters as this world-mother enjoyed her favorite child’s companionship” (*Mag* 71).

Fittingly, however, it is the portrait of her “daughter” that one finds distinctly widened in Gilman’s novel, as implied by its title. Miss Yale’s descrip-

tion of Maggie, early in the play, as "an orphan baby" who "grew up in the poor-house" and "worked since [she was] ten, in mills and shops" ("Balsam" I, 5), is enlarged upon in the novel's first chapter, which presents the societal forces shaping her temperament in greater circumstantial detail than a work for the stage, as Gilman presumably came to realize, would have been capable of conveying. Introduced as the sixteen-year-old niece of a local farm-woman with whom the picnickers are boarding, Maggie "had never known her father, who died while she was yet a baby," and "scarce remembered her mother, or the poor and transient homes in which she had lived before this somewhat grudging adoption" (*Mag* 16, 16–17). Maggie's background is then recounted with a specificity that makes her fall a good deal easier to comprehend than in the play. Raised from a young age by "an unaffectionate elderly aunt, 'doing her duty' by a child whom nobody wanted," she endures a "lonely, loveless life" while growing up in "the bare hardness of that hilly township" (17, 47). Left, as a result, with "an appetite for petting, a fierce longing to be held close—close—and called tender names" (17), Maggie in the novel is thus much more understandably defenseless against the advances of a philanderer like Armstrong.

Once Miss Yale has taken Maggie under her wing, *Mag—Marjorie* then outstrips its predecessor in the concreteness with which it charts its heroine's reinvention as Margaret Yale. Where she "had been raw and rude and willful, self-confident, a little vulgar" as "[l]ittle Mag, in New Hampshire," Gilman's protagonist "began to show agreeable changes" in Europe, where Maggie becomes aware for the first time of "her real ignorance and deficiencies" but where also "there appeared, from unused depths within her, new characteristics far more pleasant than the old ones," and where "[s]he showed a patience, a perseverance and courage in meeting difficulties, and a quiet gentleness which was beyond her friend's immediate hopes" (51). In another significant change unregistered in the play, "Great pains had been taken in training her voice," with the result that "that special cultivation, and her careful, exquisite enunciation," has left "seldom a trace of the slipshod, slangy, nasal speech of her girlhood" by the time Margaret returns to the United States after her decade's absence (101, 102). The larger metamorphosis undergone by her is encapsulated again as Margaret, walking along the steamship deck in chapter six, ponders the distance she has traveled in more ways than one during that time: "The world of knowledge which had opened to her, the world of experience, the world of action, all these had helped to form a strong base of character, the new character of Margaret Yale" (70).

In such passages, Gilman seems bent on emphasizing how completely the novel's heroine has been altered partly as a way of surmounting one of

the play's chief problems, diagnosed by Archer: the improbability that Maggie is not recognized by Armstrong, among others, once she reappears in America as Dr. Margaret Yale. As Miss Yale assures her while they cross the Atlantic from Europe, "[Y]ou needn't be in the least afraid of his knowing you," adding, "Nobody would ever know you. . . . Oh, you're safe enough" (*Mag* 74). The very effort required to preserve "this complete disguise" once she reencounters Armstrong in the Adirondacks is itself a measure of how firmly Margaret has been changed and fortified by experience in the meantime: "The sturdy strength of all the struggling years behind her was needed then—the instant shutting of the door in the face of emotion, the calling upon every faculty, and the prompt response of disciplined brain and nerves" (102). Strikingly, Gilman has the narrative briefly recall its story's own previous incarnation when describing how Margaret, in her new guise at the Adirondacks camp, experiences "the sense of being in a play, as she moved, undetected, among all those who had known her before, and now seemed so utterly unaware of it" (113).

To be sure, while Margaret "had soon grown quite calm concerning the others" at the Briggses' camp as their stay continues, "with Armstrong there was always the astonishment that he did not remember," so that "she had even sometimes an impish temptation to test his complete forgetfulness" (113). Here the novel again complicates the dramatic situation limned in "The Balsam Fir," while psychologically and morally enriching its characterization of the protagonist, by describing Margaret's adult perceptions of the man with whom she was once intimately entangled. As she "watched him guardedly" in the chapter that absorbs their bantering third-act dialogue, Armstrong "seemed to her . . . somewhat strained and overblown, too long accustomed to his part, and she marveled, as many a woman had done before, that even in her starved and stunted youth she could have found in him an overwhelming charm" (106). Capable of exhibiting interiority with singular reach and depth, the novel can present Armstrong from Margaret's now-matured perspective in a way that captures how far she has surpassed not only him but her own earlier self: "A sense of power and security rose in her, seeing him there before her, so near, and feeling nothing, not even dread of discovery" (106).

That "power and security" further manifest themselves well beyond what is enacted in the play with the novel's eleventh chapter, containing an extraordinary sequence inserted in the action between Act III, which concludes at the same point as the previous chapter, and the beginning of Act IV, retrieved shortly into chapter twelve. In rapid succession, Margaret outperforms Armstrong "in a bout of pistol practice" (in which "she showed astonish-

ing proficiency" and "shot so much better than he"), in tennis (at which "[h]e was highly skilled in many lines, not often bested by men and never before by a woman"), at "whist in the evenings" (when "Armstrong winced under Margaret's strong play"), at chess (in which he is checkmated in each of three matches with her), and in a fencing duel far more tensely dramatic than any scene in the play (114, 115). In the latter contest, Margaret is able to draw not only upon her European period's regimen of gymnastics and physical exercise, but also upon her adroitness as a surgeon. As "that still, concentrated mastery which held her hand firm when another life trembled beneath it held it now" (120), along with the foil that she is wielding against Armstrong, Margaret's professional expertise comes to her aid in defeating a man who is both her erstwhile violator and a rival physician.

To some extent, Gilman's original rendering of Armstrong is also thickened by the scenes interpolated at this point in the action, making him appear no less reprehensible in his cavalier behavior but also exploring his personality with greater nuance and forbearance by the end. As if to avoid reducing his role to that of the hackneyed blackguard of sentimental Victorian melodrama, Gilman is careful to depict him, when he proposes marriage, as more profoundly unsettled than in "The Balsam Fir" by "an overmastering love," which "Richard Armstrong was ennobled by. . . . It was the strongest feeling he had ever known, not the pleasure of a part of his nature, but the master of the whole of it. He felt the whole mass of long-established conviction pull at its moorings, break loose, and drift before the tide" (138). Under its impact, Armstrong's shock and agitation when Margaret reveals that she has not only borne a child but also never married are transmitted with a complexity beyond the reach of the play: "His first mad impulse was to rush out—away—anywhere—to escape; then came the thought of losing her, forever; then a wild rush of feeling that now at least he could secure her, damaged and soiled, but what remained, his at last; and then some little touch of the ennobling affection which strove to force its way upward through a nature ill-tuned for nobility" (139). As if the novel's Armstrong were himself on the verge of being transformed, "His world swung around within him" once he then also realizes that Margaret is the woman whom he wronged so grievously long before. While "through it all his desperate desire for her held like a chain," Armstrong "strove to bring the right ideas to bear, to find new reasons for his wishes" (139).

Somewhat thinly developed in Gilman's play, the basis on which Armstrong is nonetheless to be contrasted with Newcomb/e, along with the latter's own decisive role in the action, is also strengthened in *Mag—Marjorie*. Placed within the lengthy insertion that covers the ten-year hiatus between

Acts I and II, the fifth chapter—set mostly in Newcome's Boston office two weeks before the summer gathering at the Briggs family camp in the Adirondacks—presents him conscientiously “reading *Le Journal de Médecine*” with “an expression of quiet pleasure as he slowly reread the columns devoted to incidents of recent progress. . . . The broad desk was piled high with current literature of his profession, and the book-lined walls resembled those of a library of a medical college” (59). Toward the end of the chapter, Mrs. Briggs drops by to consult Newcome, begging him to join her family in the Adirondacks, where his presence is now plausibly explained, where Dolly Yale has taken ill far from any medical help, and where they await Miss Yale's arrival “with that young female prodigy of hers,” as Mrs. Briggs calls Margaret, “who really seems to be a credit to her—you won't mind her, I'm sure. Or are you sensitive about women doctors?” (69). His response (“Not in the least”) obviously differentiates him from Armstrong, who does not hesitate to express his disapproval not only of woman physicians but of women in any professional capacity, and establishes how much more compatible Newcome is with the “female prodigy” whom his friend will vainly pursue.² Indeed, whereas “Armstrong's manner . . . kept always in sight the fact that she was a woman and he a man,” as Margaret later discerns, “Newcome reached across the gulf as if they were both too tall to mind it” (122), epitomizing the sort of “New Man” whose emergence is so often called for in Gilman's work.

Other modifications in the novel further certify the casting of Newcome in such a role and his consequent fitness as a mate for Miss Yale's prodigy. In another scene that Gilman added when narrativizing the play, “Margaret smiled at him gratefully” as Newcome engages her in conversation during the campers' hiking excursion one afternoon: “The world of fact and thought he talked of, the large impersonality and free, respectful equality with which he met her, was an unceasing delight to her” (122). Such enhancements, like the addition of an initial encounter between them preceding the picnic, serve to accommodate Archer's claim that “the character of Newcomb, & his relation to Maggie stand greatly in need of development” (2) in “The Balsam Fir.” Similarly, *Mag*—*Marjorie*'s elongation of its final scene underscores the evenhandedness and justice that make Newcome sufficiently advanced or forward-thinking to be worthy of a woman like Margaret Yale. Having found and pocketed one of the blue ribbons worn by Maggie while berry-picking before the picnic, Newcome nearly burns it at the close of Act III (corresponding to the end of the novel's tenth chapter), after he learns of Armstrong's determination to marry Margaret; instead, he decides, “I don't know as there's any harm in my keeping this much!” (“Balsam” III, 19; *Mag*

112). Whereas Gilman then neglects to retrieve it in "The Balsam Fir," she has Newcome show Margaret this emblem of his ten-year-long love in the novel's lengthening of the denouement: "'I'll let you have a look at the only comfort I've had all that time—' and he took out that wrinkled, faded bow of ribbon with one long, curly, glistening hair tied into it" (146). Its reappearance at this point in *Mag—Marjorie*, which can make ampler room for such avowals as a novel, helps correct another flaw that Archer detected in arguing that "the end" of the play "is dramatically wrong and disappointing. What we expect . . . is that Newcomb, either in words or (better) by some silent token, shall show [Maggie] that he has all along recognized her & known her story" (9).

Nor do references to Maggie's "blue ribbon" constitute the only significant or symbolically freighted pattern of images unfolding in *Mag—Marjorie*. Perhaps nowhere is the novel subtler or more acute in delineating Margaret's trajectory than in its elaboration upon the play's titular image, bound inseparably in both texts with the moment of her "fall." In Gilman's original conception, the "rounded ridge" where the picnic occurs in the first act was to be "covered with moss, boulders, huckleberry bushes, and young balsam firs" ("Balsam" n.p.), which are made to dominate the New Hampshire landscape much more evocatively in *Mag—Marjorie*. The novel begins as Maggie's aunt—never visible in the play—is shown picking blueberries along "this rocky ridge," set against "the cool blue background of far hills across the valley," with "great moss-embroidered rocks, the loaded blueberry bushes, the balsam firs that shot up everywhere" occupying "the warm foreground" (*Mag* 15). As she "turned slowly, looking everywhere" for Maggie, Aunt Joelba "did not see through the sheltering low-hung boughs of the big balsam fir, to the fragrant hollow . . . in which one could cuddle so comfortably out of sight, and yet see out across the warm wide valley to the fir-fringed hills beyond" (15). Introducing the site of Maggie's subsequently revealed "cuddlings" with Armstrong, these passages also establish as a central fixture in the narrative the dark-green conifer indigenous to northern regions like the New England and upstate New York settings of both novel and play (while also a long-recognizable trademark of Gilman's older contemporary, Sarah Orne Jewett).

In each work, the tree is first associated with Miss Yale and with one of her favorite pastimes. When Mrs. Briggs asks her, early in the opening act (and almost identically in the novel's second chapter), "What have you got in that bag, Miss Yale?," her initial reply—"Nothing but balsam fir, Laura"—is replaced in *Mag—Marjorie* by a response voicing how obvious she feels the answer should be to her friends: "Balsam fir, as you perfectly well know"

("Balsam" I, 2; *Mag* 26). How her denim bag came to be filled is explained in an earlier passage, occurring just before the novel reaches the point at which the play's action begins, as "Miss Yale coursed ahead at a brisk gait" while approaching the hilltop with Mr. and Mrs. Briggs "and then put in her time by gathering balsam fir till they caught up" (*Mag* 24). She resumes this activity in two of the novel's additions to the picnic scene, "trimming off the tips of a small balsam with an absorbed expression" while implored by Mrs. Briggs to prevent Maggie from meeting any longer with Armstrong, whom Miss Yale then confronts shortly after "moving from tree to tree, and trimming off tips with a fine regard to symmetry" (29, 31).

The equally strong connection with Margaret has already been implicitly drawn in both texts, for it is when "Dr. Newcome stopped suddenly by the big balsam fir" that he "lifted something from beneath its wide, drooping boughs" (rather than merely from "under the large fir" ["Balsam" I, 5], as the play's inevitably blander stage directions have it) and "hastily crushed into his pocket" the blue ribbon left there by Maggie after one of her trysts with Armstrong (*Mag* 29). While Maggie and Armstrong are directed to "sit under the big fir" at the start of the first-act encounter in which she reveals her pregnancy, "They both took possession of the hollow under the boughs of the big balsam" in the novel, recalling its initial description of the site and further cementing the association of the tree with its heroine's plight ("Balsam" I, 11; *Mag* 32). Whereas Maggie "looks up, looks around wildly" in the play before she "throws herself down at the foot of the tree" after being deserted by Armstrong, "She look[s] up at the blank gray of the sky, around her at the still blue firs and bluer distances," before doing so in the novel ("Balsam" I, 14; *Mag* 34). When Miss Yale then reappears, it is only in the novel that she "raised a handful of the fragrant brown needles" shed by the balsam fir "to her nose" before observing to Maggie, in both texts, "Nice, sweet-smelling carpet to cry on" (*Mag* 35; "Balsam" I, 14). By this early point in the narrative, the tree's symbolic relevance has been so firmly established that, when Maggie exclaims in reply, "I hate it!," Gilman is able to dispense with the question ("Hate balsam fir?") that Miss Yale then asks in the play (*Mag* 35; "Balsam" I, 14).

Maggie's further exclamation, "I shall hate it as long as I live!" (more emphatic than the play's "I shall always hate it!"), is repeatedly confirmed by later events in the novel, as is the linking of the tree both to her and to Miss Yale (*Mag* 35; "Balsam" I, 14). When she meets her patroness the next day, early in the escape-and-adoption segment that Gilman added in rewriting "The Balsam Fir," Maggie "fingered the straps of Miss Yale's denim bag, and suddenly shrank from its odor as if stung"—whereupon "Miss Yale stood up

and tossed her fragrant burden some way down the hill" after admitting, "I shouldn't have brought it" (39). In a later additional passage, which narrates the afternoons spent with Dolly picking berries in the Adirondacks, "[Margaret] remembered the berries of her childhood's hills as lovingly as she hated balsam fir" (109). Some days later, as the Briggses and their guests embark upon the mountain hike, it is said that a "night on the peak had no terrors for any of them" because "there was plenty of balsam fir for couches—Margaret made a wry face as she heard them extolling its attractions" (121).

Hardened enough by then to respond in such a sardonic, stoical way to this sort of reminder, Margaret is not able to handle a similar moment with quite as much equanimity when she receives a gift from Dolly in the play's one pivotal encounter between them. In the way that her mother's reaction to the gift is recorded, *Mag—Marjorie* once again exploits prose fiction's greater ability to render states of inwardness that can be only suggested in the enactment of a dramatic work. As prompted by Gilman's stage directions, Margaret "[o]pens box, takes out a fir cushion," and "[s]its staring at it"—a moment illuminatingly dilated in the novel, in which Margaret "opened the box. There lay a cushion of balsam fir, and as its distinctive fragrance rose about her, she sat silent, staring at it" ("Balsam" IV, 2; *Mag* 129). Dolly's "triumphant" declaration in both play and novel ("It's balsam fir! Don't you love it?"), along with her further question, "But don't you like the smell?" when complimented on the gift's other qualities ("Balsam" IV, 3; *Mag* 129, 130), draws the same ironic response from her mother. In another of the novel's psychologically penetrating refinements, however, "Margaret smiled that wry little smile of hers, that could see humor in a death warrant, if it was there," before replying, as she does in the play, "It is very fragrant, dear. I never heard of anybody who didn't like it, did you?" (*Mag* 130; "Balsam" IV, 3).

Margaret, of course, knows of at least one exception, as does Miss Yale, who "gets odor of cushion" when she reenters at this point in the play, but who "caught . . . the odor of balsam fir" in the novel's more exact phrase, an odor from which we then learn how assiduously she has shielded her ward: "Fond as she was of it, she had never had such a cushion with her when she was with Margaret" ("Balsam" IV, 4; *Mag* 130). Assuring Margaret, "I know just how you feel, dear," after sending Dolly to bed, Miss Yale compassionately acknowledges, "you hate that smell more than anything on earth"—a remark that keenly accentuates the sentiment expressed in the play when she observes, more prosaically, "you hate that particular smell" (*Mag* 130–31; "Balsam" IV, 4). The point of what she does next with Dolly's gift, briskly summarized in the play's stage directions ("puts it back in box, covers it, lays it on table, goes and open windows" ["Balsam" IV, 4]), is

likewise sharpened at the same moment in *Mag—Marjorie*, as Miss Yale “laid the offending cushion back in the box, covered it, and set it away from them, opening both windows for a sweep of fresh wintry air to take away the cruel odor” (*Mag* 131). Accidentally released when Armstrong “threw out his hands,” during his tumultuous final encounter with Margaret, and “knocked the cover from the box” after reiterating his marriage proposal, its power in triggering his realization that she and “Mag” are the same person is exerted much less epiphanically in the play’s stage directions (according to which “the odor of the pine cushion rises about him”) than in the novel’s last chapter, where “the fire-warmed fragrance of the balsam fir rose around him . . . and he remembered” (“Balsam” IV, 11; *Mag* 139).

It is ultimately as just such an aid to (often unwelcome) remembrance that the odor serves throughout *Mag—Marjorie* far more credibly than it could have on the stage, where “[t]he thing simply cannot be conveyed,” in Archer’s appraisal, unless “the audience could be made . . . actually to smell the fir needles,” and where “the potency of an imagined scent would never come home to the public” (8). Evidently recognizing that “[t]his is an idea which might be effective in narrative, not in drama,” as Archer maintained (9), Gilman’s development of such an idea when remodeling “The Balsam Fir” into a novel reflects also, however, a perhaps unexpected awareness of one of the leading literary innovations of the early twentieth century. As Miss Yale declares to Margaret after witnessing the impact of Dolly’s gift, “Funny—how smells and memories stick together!” (*Mag* 131). In the mnemonic function of the fir-tree odor’s recurrence, Gilman may be said to have registered, in her own characteristically light-fingered way, the sort of associative link that Proust’s narrator would soon draw more flamboyantly, at Combray, between the operation of memory and one of the four other senses. Beyond merely an intermittent reminder, the unmistakable scent of balsam fir amounts to a sort of objective correlative for Maggie/Margaret’s torment and shame, as Gilman appears to have grasped, quite unostentatiously, the value of a device canonized soon thereafter, with much fanfare, in modernist poetics.

Although titled so as to transmit Gilman’s reconceptualization of her originally dramatized story, *Mag—Marjorie* thus extends the eponymous image of “The Balsam Fir” into a motif that now becomes more pervasive, ironically, than in the play named after it. In that way, as in many others, her expansion of “The Balsam Fir” into a novel—like her rewriting of “Three Women” and “Interrupted”—shows how patiently and thriftily Gilman may be said to have constructed a literary oeuvre, finding a more suitable use in one genre for material first handled in another. As in her rewriting of “Three Women” and “Interrupted,” such versatility further illustrates the

extent to which Gilman "rove between genres for the most effective means of communicating the ways and means of change" (Beer 170), perceiving with "The Balsam Fir" that its *donnée*—involving an irreparably harmed young woman's phoenix-like resurgence—needed the breadth and elasticity provided by a novel to be fully realized. Formally, the novel permitted the play's balsam-fir imagery to be drawn out more lucidly, and its characters and plot more space in which to develop unhurriedly, than would have been possible in dramatic terms. As if no one genre proved adequate to the task of a thinker whose "principal topics," in her own words, "were in direct contravention of established views, beliefs and emotions" (*Living* 304), Gilman's iconoclastic vision thus required a number of different imaginative, polemical, and discursive forms—even in the writing of a single work—to articulate itself. In that sense, it may be argued that "Gilman deliberately exploited the intertextual and intergeneric resonances set up" not only, as Val Gough and Jill Rudd assert, "by her juxtaposition of such a variety of genres" (6) in each issue of *The Forerunner* but also by this migration between genres of more than one particular text.

Nor was Gilman always necessarily content with the mode into which she transposed any of those works. Replying to an anonymous 1914 correspondent who declared that he had converted an unidentified novel of hers into a play, Gilman informed him that in fact "the one you have selected—conspicuously the only one open to such treatment—was first written as a play, and is intended to be re-written as a play. It is no wonder you 'adapted the dialogue straight'—it was taken straight from a play, in large part" (Gilman, Letter).³ Having recast more than one of her plays as a novel by this time, Gilman thus evidently planned to turn that novel—whichever one it was—back into a play at some point.⁴ Whether *Mag—Marjorie* or *Won Over* was "the only one" of her novels that she considered "open to such treatment," the fact that she was prepared to switch genres once again in refashioning the same piece yet another time demonstrates how restless and uncomplacent Gilman remained even at the peak of her productivity, continuing to challenge herself as a writer far more resourceful, dexterous, and nimbly equipped than she would ever have claimed to be.

NOTES

1. In the surviving typescript of the play, each of its four acts is paginated separately; citations will be identified parenthetically by act and page numbers.

2. Equally important, it is through Newcome that Gilman chooses, in the same

chapter, to activate a romantic subplot involving Daisy Briggs and her mother's cousin, Gerald Battlesmith, a character absent from the play and first appearing in the novel as an additional participant in the picnic scene ten summers earlier. Vastly preferable to Armstrong, who has been courting Daisy with Mrs. Briggs's approval in both texts, Gerald confides in Newcome about his attachment to Daisy and is encouraged by him not to postpone proposing marriage any longer—advice that further recommends the physician to Margaret, who is disconcertedly aware of Armstrong's intentions. In spinning off this tangent to the main storyline of "The Balsam Fir," Gilman thus evidently came to agree with one of its readers that "[a] younger man should be introduced as Daisy's lover," although more in order to solidify the depiction of Newcomb's virtues than, moralistically, "for the purpose . . . later on of making Margaret realize more and more bitterly what she has lost in losing her innocence" (Tutwiler 4).

3. My thanks to Cynthia J. Davis for bringing this letter to my attention.

4. In this willingness to consider a number of her works generically malleable, Gilman in fact resembles none of her contemporaries more than the one, oddly enough, to whom she is perhaps least often likened, the major-phase Henry James, who rewrote an unstaged play (*The Outcry*) as a novel in 1910 and an 1892 short story ("Owen Wingrave") as a play, *The Saloon* (1908), two years earlier, and whose 1907 play *The High Bid* dramatized a short story, "Covering End" (1898), that had itself been derived from a one-acter, *Summersoft* (1895). If only as an additional way of documenting Gilman's craftsmanship, one might further explore this affinity with other writers who found it expedient, at one point or another in their careers, to resort to such a curious practice, in which "author and adapter," as Linda Hutcheon observes, ". . . are one and the same person" (80).

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“The Same Revulsion against Them All”

Ida Tarbell and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Suffrage Dialogue

ALETA FEINSOD CANE

In the summer of 1914, just as the Great War was about to end, still no universal suffrage had been enacted in the United States. The national suffrage movement was battered by a deep-pocketed campaign against Amendment XIX to the Constitution and was wearied by the foolish inconsistencies of the anti-suffrage arguments. Articles, speeches, and meetings by those on both sides of the issue had been dragging on for years. The well-publicized 1912 dialogue between Ida Tarbell (1857–1944) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one of the more interesting examples of the argument. Summing up the lengthy discourse, with their characteristic good humor (at least in print), suffragists published the following unsigned piece in the Nashville *Tennessean* for June 18, 1916. Titled ““Our Own Twelve Anti-Suffrage Reasons’ Why Woman Should Not be Enfranchised,” it reads as follows:

Because no woman will leave her domestic duties to vote.
 Because no woman who votes will attend to her domestic duties.
 Because it will make dissension between husband and wife.
 Because every wife will vote exactly as her husband does.
 Because bad women will corrupt our politics.
 Because bad politics will corrupt our women.
 Because women have no power of organization.
 Because women will found themselves a woman’s party.

Because men and women are so different that they must have different duties.
Because men and women are so much alike that men with one vote can
express themselves and us, too. (qtd. in Camhi 181)

This *Tennessean* tidbit satirizes some of the assertions made by Ida Tarbell in her "Uneasy Woman" series for the *American Magazine*, begun in January 1912. It was, arguably, the most influential anti-suffrage statement put forward during the Progressive Era. Tarbell's six essays attempt to discredit feminist and suffragist ideals that Charlotte Perkins Gilman had been writing and speaking about for over a decade. Gilman responded to the first four of these articles beginning with the February 1912 issue of *The Forerunner*. The dialogue created by these articles opens a window through which to examine the anti-feminist and anti-suffrage currents present in Progressive Era thought. Furthermore, the study of these articles from within the context of their individual periodicals affords us a larger, more rounded conception of the social, political, and economic moment in which these ideas were disseminated.

The dialogue between Tarbell and Gilman dramatically underscores the significance of reading these articles in their original periodicals rather than simply in the books or anthologies in which they subsequently appeared. In their recent essay "The Rise of Periodical Studies," Sean Latham and Robert Scholes cite social and cultural critic Cary Nelson's important statement that "periodicals should be read as texts that have a unity different from but comparable with that of individual books" (517). *The Forerunner* and the *American Magazine* serve as examples of this distinct unity. Both Gilman and Tarbell were writers and, more importantly here, editors of their respective periodicals. Each had authority over which materials would be published and the position within the periodical that each item would take. The stories, essays, poems, and serialized fiction, and their individual placement, serve as a *basso continuo* under the melodic themes of their arguments. Gilman's choice of articles on suffrage and serialization of "Our Brains and What Ails Them," one of her three revisions of *Human Work* (1904),¹ as well as her reviews, poems, serialized fiction, and stories, all extol the virtues of suffrage, the self-empowered working woman, and women who come to the aid of their less able sisters. They represent a marked contrast to the choices Tarbell made for the *American Magazine*'s content with which she surrounds her "Uneasy Woman" articles. Tarbell chose biographies of contemporary women that celebrated women's modesty, virtue, and adherence to their traditional roles. The magazine also features fiction that relies heavily on conventional marriage plots and happy homemaker vignettes. To study the

dialogue around the “Uneasy Woman” series within the larger context of the entire *Forerunner* and *American Magazine* is to see the importance of the periodical as the discrete artifact that it is.

The Forerunner delivered Gilman’s fiction, polemics, reviews, and poetry from 1909 through 1916. It was a progressive, feminist, and pro-suffrage periodical totally written, edited, and published by Gilman herself. Her monthly “Comment and Review” feature afforded her space and time to respond to the social and political currents articulated in other contemporary periodicals. In this way, she participated in a dialogue with the significant thinkers and writers of her time. The “Comment and Review” columns kept selected names in the readership’s mind and brought issues into discussion in a more balanced way than today’s televised shouting matches. In 1912, both Gilman and Tarbell were well known to the public. Gilman published the widely read and much discussed *Women and Economics* in 1898. Between 1912 and 1914 her lectures on “The Larger Feminism” both in New York and in London received wide international press coverage. She was considered one of the most famous public intellectuals of her time. Critic Larry Ceplair categorizes these years as “probably . . . the apex” of Gilman’s career (192).²

Tarbell, too, had reached the height of her fame at that point, as she was well known and highly regarded as the author of the famous exposé of John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil. She was a muckraking journalist and an editor on the staff of *McClure’s* magazine. Subsequently she was one of the owners, editors, and writers of the *American Magazine*, which she and her *McClure’s* colleagues (including John Philips, Lincoln Steffens, and Ray Stannard Baker) formed when they left Samuel McClure’s employment.

The *American Magazine* staff seemed to have left their investigative zeal at *McClure’s*. They had sensed the change in the political winds characterized in a speech by the progressive Theodore Roosevelt who—quoting John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*—was the first to use the term “muckrake” pejoratively in reference to investigative journalists. He said,

Now, it is very necessary that we should not flinch from seeing what is vile and debasing. . . . But the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes save of his feats with the muckrake, speedily becomes, not a help to society, not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces of evil. (qtd. in Kaplan 151)

The muckrakers’ moment had passed. The *American Magazine’s* writer/owners sought to tone down the progressive rhetoric in their periodical. For

example, instead of articles exposing corporate or government corruption and collusion, they published a year-long hagiography of Wisconsin's Progressive senator, Robert La Follette. Ray Stannard Baker (famed for his articles on municipal graft, such as "The Shame of the Cities," which led to the creation of many local good government organizations and better oversight of the way cities were run and their money disbursed) had to adopt a pseudonym (David Grayson) for a long series of cheerful essays filled with platitudes and homely philosophies. The essays had such titles as "Adventures in Friendship" and "Adventures in Solitude." The *American Magazine* was neither fish nor fowl, neither a red blooded muckraking magazine like *McClure's* nor a conservative periodical such as *The Saturday Evening Post*. An interesting metaphor for the political position of the magazine is an article appearing in the March 1912 issue. Writer Albert J. Nock lauds Francis Galton's work as the next great step in the science of evolution.³ Galton (Darwin's cousin) used photography, phrenology, and racist speculation to proclaim the white, Anglo-Saxon as the purest racial type and the end-product of evolution. At the *American Magazine*, Sam McClure's old muckrakers set out to recreate the best part of his magazine, its incisive investigative reporting, only presenting it more gently, or maybe more genteelly. Instead, they took what was revolutionary and turned it into something reactionary masquerading as something original, much as Galton took the paradigm-shifting science of evolution and turned it into something unscientific and with nasty political ramifications.

Tarbell's series, "The Uneasy Woman," depicts men as victims and as under siege from unhappy women who blame men for their own unhappiness. Men were to be preminent according to Tarbell, and it was woman's natural role to make that possible. She wrote, "Man," who challenges the world "in an eternal effort to conquer, understand, and reduce to order both nature and his fellows," needs a place to rest "where his head is not in danger, his heart is not harassed. Woman, by the virtue of the business nature assigns her, has always been theoretically the maker and keeper of the necessary place of peace" ("The Uneasy Woman" 259).

It is often surprising to the contemporary reader to encounter the defining debates of the Progressive Era. Roosevelt, a Progressive politician, rang the death knell for muckraking. Jane Addams, a champion of the immigrant and the under-served lower class, suggested that lynching might be excused sometimes as a form of southern chivalry.⁴ Gilman, who was famous for her outspoken pacifism, became a hawk during the Great War. The startling dialogue between Gilman and Tarbell on the issues of feminism and suffrage

are but one more of the surprises of that era. Who today would believe that Ida Tarbell, a famous, college-educated, single, childless, self-supporting, and self-sufficient writer and editor, would be a vocal anti-feminist and anti-suffragist? But, as she wrote to John Philips, her publisher, her own studies about women's participation in the French Revolution had made her decidedly reactionary. She said that she believed women's "intensity and implacability" (qtd. in Camhi 176) made them a liability to the progress of humankind. Tarbell's stereotyped and remarkably unscientific, undocumented arguments against her contemporaries' struggle for the vote were carefully refuted by Gilman's more logical and well-documented responses.

Before examining the actual dialogue between Tarbell and Gilman, a brief overview of the anti-suffrage movement seems in order. The earliest official anti-suffragist group was the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women (MAOFESW) founded in 1882. By 1900 similar groups had formed in New York, Illinois, California, South Dakota, Washington, and Oregon. They coalesced into the National Association Opposed to Women Suffrage in 1911 with headquarters in New York City. Middle- and upper-class white Protestant women (along with a smattering of foreign-born Catholic women), and the institution of the Catholic Church in America, felt threatened by feminist views on equality in marriage, women's education, work outside the home, and dress reform. The "Anti's," as they referred to themselves, felt that such notions "unsexed" women and detracted from their moral sway over the Christian home. Such attitudes hearken back to ideas of Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood. The former taught that woman's true work was to raise thoughtful, educated sons who would vote wisely and serve the nation well. The latter notion promoted woman's role in the home as moral preceptor and creator of a place of peace for harried, overworked husbands.⁵ Suffragist ideas like those of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which Tarbell and other anti-suffragists derided as too strident, threatened the autonomy that the "Anti's" believed was their birthright as mothers and homemakers. They perceived Progressive ideas of women's roles, and especially the coming of the New Woman, as threatening to their comfortable status quo and as subversive to their religious belief that man was the head of his household as Christ was the head of his church. In her essay "'Better Citizens Without the Ballot': American Anti-Suffrage Women and Their Rationale During the Progressive Era," Manuela Thurner argues that the "Anti's" believed that women could be apolitical and thereby more powerful as agents of change. When Florence Kelley wrote that she saw the "Anti's" as "shirks" who were too "comfortable," the anti-suffragist Sarah C. Preston responded that the "Anti's" were "disinterested,

public-spirited citizens who give their time and service . . . without the hope of political reward or preference" (qtd. in Thurner 208). Additionally, Mrs. J. B. Gilfan of the Minnesota Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage wrote, "Wherever woman's influence, counsel or work is needed by the community, there will you find her, so far with little thought of political beliefs. . . . The pedestals they are said to stand upon move them into all the demands of the community" (qtd. in Thurner 210).⁶ The "pedestals" upon which women were said to stand, apolitically, sound suspiciously like a throwback to the purported elevated status of women within the separate sphere of home. Her very diction marks Gilfan as less committed to social action than to maintaining the position of moral superiority, or "the pedestal" that separate spheres supposedly afforded to women. Furthermore, the idea that educated, active women would take money from men with well-defined political and financial agendas in order publicly to assert that women are more powerful with no political agency seems disingenuous, at the very least.

Suffragists did not perceive the strength, the wealth, or the organization of their opposition until around 1896, and even then they viewed such opposition as a positive force that would galvanize suffragists to redouble their zeal. As early as 1885, *The Woman's Journal*, whose editor was Alice Stone Blackwell, published the following observation:

The annual hearing of remonstrants promote woman suffrage in many ways. It excites discussion: it generally finishes the conversion of some waverers to the right side, and it invariably makes the friends of suffrage indignant and stirs them up to redoubled zeal. Last, but not least, it brings forth a crop of argumentative papers or set speeches against woman suffrage which are an arsenal of weapons for the suffragists during the following year. (qtd. in Camhi 180)

The women's "Anti" group was but a shadow and a front for the more powerful men's anti-suffrage movement. This men's group was well financed and politically connected. It was funded by industrialists and the Catholic Church and was led by J. P. Morgan's son-in-law, Everett P. Wheeler, who was corporate counsel for many large business groups. Those corporations supported anti-suffrage votes in Congress and the Senate. New York's Senator Wadsworth continually voted against federal votes for women long after his own constituents had enfranchised New York state women. Similarly, Senator Weeks of Massachusetts had a consistent anti-suffrage voting record. Both these men accepted large campaign contributions from Wheeler's National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage. Interestingly, although men always

had the power to vote on suffrage and the money to buy those votes, the face and voice of the anti-suffrage movement was always presented as a woman's. Time and again, whenever there was a forum or a government hearing, it was a woman who was sent to present the anti-suffrage argument, making it seem as though women were anxious to keep themselves disenfranchised.

Lobbyists, most particularly from the deep-pocketed alcohol distilleries and the textile industries, worked diligently to undermine suffrage. The distillers feared that women would vote in Prohibition. The temperance movement had always been loud and clear about its agenda, after all. Textile manufacturers worried that women voters would support legislation that increased wages and reduce the work week for women and children workers. Anti-suffrage lobbies also worried that women were, in general, too pacific and would not support future wars. Even though the Wheeler group, the religious institutions, and the lobbyists had money and political power, they failed to stop the march of American women's progress. They did, however, manage to delay the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment until 1920.

Tarbell and Gilman each tried to sway the opinion of the group comprised of educated upper- and middle-class women who were ambivalent about their lives and about suffrage. By the turn of the twentieth century, many of these young women had grown up with such privileges as a college education that the first wave of feminism had wrought. Theodore Roosevelt had already argued that women who were college educated and who employed birth control to limit family size were committing "race suicide," and in January 1895, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell (whose rest cure influenced Gilman's story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper") told Radcliffe students that if women sought careers because of their education rather than choose what he saw as the finer and nobler domestic life, "then better close every college door in the land" (qtd. in Camhi 24). Yet young women did want to use their educations outside of the home and to advance themselves in their careers. These were the readers whose opinions Gilman and Tarbell sought to capture. One such individual was Inez Haynes Gillmore, a successful writer whose short stories often appeared in the pages of the *American Magazine*. She wrote of herself, "I hang in a void midway between two spheres—the man's sphere and the woman's sphere. A professional career . . . puts me beyond the reach of the average woman's duties and pleasures. The conventional limitations of the female put me beyond the reach of the average man's duties and pleasures" (qtd. in Lasch 58).

Tarbell, too, was just such a conflicted woman. She lived a quintessential "New Woman" lifestyle, unmarried, eager to support herself and pursue her own goals and preserve her own liberties. She owned property in her own

name. Yet in 1899, when she moved to New York City to take up the editorial position at *McClure's*, she was encouraged by the wealthy and activist Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer to join the New York Association Opposed to Women's Suffrage. Her membership and participation were always kept something of a secret. John Phillips, Tarbell's friend and co-editor and publisher of the *American Magazine*,⁷ found Tarbell's almost militant anti-feminism difficult to understand or to reconcile with the choices she had made in the conduct of her own life. He asked her to write to him explaining the glaring discrepancy between her conduct and her comments. Tarbell replied that she had been raised by a feminist mother who entertained feminist speakers at home, but that during her college years she changed her own mind because she thought that there were bigger ideas afoot than those of women's causes and rights. During the 1880's, as a writer and editor she decided that woman's contribution to civilization should not be in the public sphere but in the private. Her first published monograph concerned the women of the French Revolution. Studying women's participation in the violence took from her, she wrote, "all enthusiasm I had ever felt for women in public life. . . . Radical and conservative, Royalist and democrat, aristocrat and proletariat, I had the same revulsion against them all" (qtd. in Camhi 176). Tarbell believed that women participants in the French Revolution demonstrated that rather than injecting a civilizing influence on events, the events uncivilized them instead. She wrote to Phillips that she believed that there were more women who did not want the vote than those who did. Throwing her lot in with the former, she wrote in her letter that it is a fallacy that "we can be saved morally, economically, or socially by laws and systems"; she felt that her misgivings about suffrage were "a kind of instinct—it is not logic or argument, I mistrust it—I do not want it" (qtd. in Camhi 178). Tarbell relies on "feelings" rather than intellect or logic to make her point. The essentialist position presented in her letter and in her subsequent "Uneasy Woman" articles are marked by this emotional rather than reasoned strategy.

Tarbell's earliest anti-feminist articles were a series on woman's role in the *American Magazine*, concluding in May 1910. Gilman responded to these articles in *The Forerunner* with "Suffrage":

[A] true democracy requires the intelligent participation of all the people and . . . women are people. . . . I advocate woman suffrage on two grounds: first because a dependent and servile womanhood is an immovable obstacle to race development; second because the major defects of our civilization are clearly traceable to the degradation of the female and the unbalanced predominance of the male, which unnatural relation is responsible for the

social evil, for the predatory and combative elements in our economic processes, and for that colossal mingling of folly, waste, and horror, that wholly masculine phenomenon—war. (24)

In *The Forerunner* for March 1911, Gilman became more specific and complained in her “Answers to the ‘Anti’s,’” “But the Anti’s of painful prominence are anti-virtue. They are opposing a well-known good. They wish to prevent people from doing right” (74). She then enumerated six anti-suffrage arguments and refuted each one. But by 1912, Gilman saw Tarbell as an even more formidable opponent to her own fiercely held ideas, so that when “The Uneasy Woman” was serialized in the *American Magazine*, she meticulously refuted Tarbell’s arguments in *The Forerunner*.

In the February 1912 *Forerunner*, Gilman respectfully takes Tarbell to task in “Miss Ida Tarbell’s ‘Uneasy Woman.’” Tarbell relies on broad generalizations: she argues, “Society, especially man-made society, resents a restless woman” (38). Gilman counters that the world is not necessarily arranged for the comfort of only one sex: “Since woman is the mother and maker of mankind, why is it not an imperative that life be arranged to suit her?” (38). When Gilman quotes Tarbell that homemaking is “Nature’s plan for her [woman]” and the only thing that ails woman is “false mating,” Gilman dismisses her argument summarily (38). But when she takes on Tarbell’s assertion that outside of homemaking all other vocations belong to “the Business of Being a Man,” Gilman reminds her readers that “books, trades and profession are not ‘his.’ They are not masculine distinctions. They have nothing whatever to do with sex. They are human and belong to women precisely as much as to men” (39). Gilman continues in this vein by again citing Tarbell’s opinion that women can find no circumstances beyond the home where female “ripeness” and “wisdom” can be developed (39). Laughing in print, Gilman suggests that Tarbell listen to the “estimable ladies” on a resort piazza to see what “wisdom” and “ripeness” they “who have never had any other business except being women” have developed (39). Finally, Gilman quotes Tarbell’s argument that “the suffragist adapts to her needs a form of feminine coquetry as old as the world. To defy and to denounce the male has always been one of woman’s most successful provocative ways” (39). Gilman suggests that this is “the meanest rejoinder” in the whole essay and that suffrage is not, in fact, historically woman’s way of catching or keeping a man. In closing, Gilman offers Tarbell a compliment of sorts when she says that “Ida Tarbell is respected and admired by thousands of readers; of those thousands there will be few who will not be ashamed by the weakness of this article” (39).

Studying *The Forerunner* for February 1912 as a periodical and its nature

as a discrete artifact demonstrates how Gilman took thematic control over the issue as a whole. The article preceding Gilman's response to Tarbell is titled "Women and Democracy." In this piece, Gilman states her own vision of the world and how it will be improved when women earn the vote. But she also strongly states that women must work harder to convince opponents that they are working still. She argues,

The essential condition of democracy is an advanced state of social consciousness. . . . It has nothing whatever to do with the superiority of individuals.

Here is where all the timid limitations to progress of democracy fall to ground, the "property qualification," the "education qualification," and the "sex qualification."

The demand for these rests on the older idea of government as a matter of authority; of something done to us by someone else. That rests on the old basic family relation; where the older and wiser must of necessity preserve and manage the common interest of the unequal group. (35)

"Government in our present sense," she argues, "is not the exercise of authority; it is the performance of service" (35–36). The mass of nonvoting women "constitutes a huge inert class, distributed evenly throughout society, acting as a general check to the orderly development of government. The child who should be in training for his 'kingship' [Tarbell's term] . . . is reared in an atmosphere pre-democratic by ten thousand years; an atmosphere where his strongest modifying influence—his mother—knows nothing and cares nothing for the major government processes of society in her time and race; for the large economic and political processes of democracy" (36). Gilman fills out *The Forerunner's* page where her article on Tarbell ends with a poem called "Cycles." Its third and final stanza reads:

I am Human.
Working so
Building with immortal will,
Rising through the ages slow
On the generations grow—
Upward still. (39)

Gilman did not dignify Tarbell's second article, "Making a Man of Herself," with more than a few lines of her February 1912 *Forerunner's* "Comment and Review" page. Here she proclaims, as "A Case of Continued

Delusion,” that this article “rests on two false premises: first, that human work is a male function, and second, that a woman that accomplishes anything in extra-domestic lines must thereby forfeit all hope of home and marriage” (84). Gilman editorialized, “To see anyone trying to sweep back the tide with a broom is either pathetic or ridiculous, and Miss Tarbell’s work stands too high to be ridiculous. But for such a woman so conspicuously to exhibit an old, and common fallacy, in the face of present knowledge[,] is truly pitiful” (84).

The *American Magazine* for March is yet another example of the periodical as a thematically controlled singular entity. The monthly “Interesting People” column profiles Lady Gregory. Like all the women featured in these monthly pieces, Lady Gregory’s worldly achievements are subsumed by her womanly virtue and modesty.⁸ The Gregory piece is followed by an Edna Ferber story in which the traveling saleswoman Emma McChesney demands equal treatment in a full hotel saying, “I’m doing a man’s work and earning a man’s salary and demanding to be treated with as much consideration as you’d show a man” (555). A male competitor says he likes her but objects to the fact that she gets special treatment from buyers because she is a woman. The saleswoman wins the sale but is portrayed as decidedly too much the huckster by all the men around her. The implication here is that modest woman, like Lady Gregory, can succeed but must always be a lady first, lest she lose an essential element of her womanly virtue.

The reader is now prepared to accept more readily Tarbell’s installment titled “The Business of Being a Woman.” In it she tackles the notion that young girls get no good information about the biology of womanhood or motherhood. They receive information from other “uneasy women” who mistakenly impart that the choice of a life partner is made on the basis of a man’s ability to make a woman happy. She lets this bad advice create in her mind a set of rules about men that she will impose on her mate. “Flexibility, adaptation, [and] fair-mindedness” should be the watchwords of marriage, she suggests (564). But most women miss out, never understanding that “marriage is made or unmade by small, not great things” (564). Tarbell suggests that marriage is an economic partnership but that women don’t appreciate that, if a woman fails in her job as a wise consumer, she fails the man who is the producer. She further says that women’s clubs are a scourge on the land because they distract women from seeing the world around them as it is. The local butcher is being squeezed out by a huge meat concern who offers cheaper beef but who, after destroying the local businessman, then sells the club woman inferior beef at a higher price because she was too busy studying Greek drama to pay attention to the world around her. Woman’s job, Tarbell

asserts, is to "recognize that she is a guardian of quality, honesty, and humanity in industry" (565). The lack of honesty in all American enterprise is thus laid at the feet of the American homemaker. Further, Tarbell reprises Sarah Josepha Hale's mid-nineteenth-century cry for a resurgence of Republican Motherhood: Woman's great task is to turn out good men. "If our Uneasy Woman could grasp the full meaning of her place in this democracy, a place so essential that democracy must be overthrown unless she rises to it—a part which man is not equipped to play and which he ought not to be asked to play, would she not cease to apologize for herself—cease to look with envy on men's occupations? . . . Her great task is to prepare the citizen" (568). This job calls for nobility and energy but not necessarily, Tarbell asserts, the right to vote. The American woman must remember that her role is to raise good moral sons; otherwise the nation will fail. (Daughters do not merit a role in this discussion.)

In that same March 1912 issue of the *American Magazine* was an episode of H. G. Wells's serialized novel "Marriage." In this installment, a young couple who have met, fallen in love, and married in haste have become unhappy because he is thrifty and she is the conspicuous consumer. The episode of the Wells story underscores Tarbell's message about two of the primary sources of unhappiness in marriage. The first is making the wrong choice in mate, based on the idea that all that matters is that a man will make a woman happy. The second point is that a woman who is not a careful observer of the market around her is a poor consumer, no matter how much money she spends.⁹ It would appear that Tarbell, as editor, previewed the Wells piece and tailored her own submission to make use of the fictional marriage as an example of her points.

In the April 1912 *Forerunner* Gilman responds in "Miss Tarbell's Third Paper" that the main problem with her "Business of Being a Woman" is that Tarbell conflates that business with the business of housekeeping: "A physiological and psychological process is by no means the same thing as an economic process—a trade" (92). Gilman also criticizes Tarbell's apparent support for a system in which raising sons for "functions beyond those of fatherhood" but not doing the same for daughters results in "the maintenance of one sex for the sole purpose of the bearing and rearing of the other" (92). Further, Gilman argues that motherhood is important, but that a young woman's choice of mate should be made solely on the basis of her partner's being "a clean and vigorous father for her children"(92). She argues that a woman's work as a man's partner should be paid work. Her example is that of a man and a woman as partners in a restaurant, where they share the work and the profits as economic partners. But a man who has a servant, no

matter how much that servant is loved, does not share economic profit with her. Motherhood is one thing, but a woman's work in the home is a job and should be compensated. Whereas Tarbell argues that raising good citizens must be a woman's primary job, Gilman counters that if we are to have good citizens from childhood on, we must begin with mothers who are good citizens. All corruption of democracy, all graft in the town government, and all the cheating in the commercial sector can be laid at the feet of emancipated women who do not look to their responsibilities, according to Ida Tarbell. Gilman insists that this argument is specious nonsense.

Tarbell seems to be actively attacking a main thesis of Gilman's earlier work—notably *Women and Economics* (1898), *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home* (1903) and *Human Work* (1904)—in which Gilman had asserted, especially in *Women and Economics*, that women are still bound by a primitive “sexuo-economic relation” (79). She had written, “We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation” (5). Tarbell's “Business of Being a Woman,” according to Gilman, exemplifies that same practice, held onto by primitive people the world over from time immemorial. For Gilman “the business of being a woman” is not synonymous with housekeeping (92). She cannot abide this essentialist notion and reminds her readers that “Woman is a female. Granted. Woman is nothing but a female. Denied” (95). She further argues that though Tarbell distinguishes between the quality of the lives of women in non-suffrage states and those in states where women could vote on state and local issues and candidates, these are false comparisons. Suffrage has little or nothing to do with the personal choices and issues that Tarbell raises. Gilman adds a poem to underscore her opinion of the Tarbell article. In the third and last stanza of “Thoughts and Facts,” she concludes:

Long the lifestream held its own,
Hers alone.
That first form, through ages dim,
Slowly has developed him.
Late he came, with little stir,
As God's last best gift to her.
What he thinks may guide his acts,
But it does not alter facts. (95)

Thus Gilman refutes Tarbell, reminding us of woman's place in the world and also the sociological thesis she shared with Lester Ward, author of *Dynamic*

Sociology (1883), that woman was the primary figure in human evolution while man was secondary.¹⁰

In April, Tarbell offered her installment "The Homeless Daughter." She argues that young women should stay at home until marriage and that they will encounter grief if they do not. Girls only wish to leave home because the worth of homemaking has been devalued by militant feminism. Girls' freedoms can be dangerous, and those who seek personal advancement and pleasure are, to Tarbell, "homeless" daughters. Furthermore, women with grown children should stay at home and not seek political jobs or work outside the home, where their "business" is not "done," despite their children's absence (692). They should remain at home as a symbol of what is right about the home and a visible sign of the home's goodness, she asserts.

In her May 1912 refutation, "Miss Tarbell's 'The Homeless Daughter,'" Gilman acknowledges Tarbell's recognition that "changes . . . make the home no longer a place of compelling industry in a dozen lines at once, able to continually employ the energies of all its women" (120). Gilman also agrees that "parental authority used upon an adult daughter . . . [is] merely a lingering relic of a once useful force; and the daughter's need of some larger more far-reaching work" is understandable and laudable (120). While Gilman applauds Tarbell's desire that a "Young Woman. . . understand the purposes, methods and needs of humanity in [her] time and place, and give to it [her] best service," Gilman responds that "the cumulative results in our general gain and happiness depend on the courage and honesty with which we all perform our social service" (120). As for keeping active older mothers at home as symbols of goodness, Gilman is completely dismissive: "That active, energetic woman of fifty, who has fulfilled her cycle of mother duties" needs to get out into the world. Gilman wonders how our young women are to be saved by "an unoccupied mother at home, twiddling her thumbs in the well-dusted parlor; and yet utterly uninfluenced by that same parent if she spent part of her time on the school board or inspecting factories; or if, without sacrificing an hour to such duties, she did read the newspaper—that school of political wisdom! and vote once a year?" (121).

This response is preceded by Gilman's not terribly memorable story, "A Strange Influence," about an eighteen-month-old baby who becomes an unwitting ventriloquist's doll for a little while and tells off her lazy mother who can keep neither her house nor her servants. The child's live-in grandmother could and would do a much better job of housekeeping and childcare if only the young mother would allow her to do it. So shocked are the baby's parents that the mother accedes immediately to the child's demands. Grandmother takes over and the house is cleaner, safer, and happier for all. There is

a place for the woman after fifty, says Gilman, and in this case the job is a job she knows best: housekeeping. Although not as good a story nor as strong an argument as “Making a Change” (1911) or “Mrs. Elder’s Idea” (1912), “A Strange Influence” makes Gilman’s case that young women should be out working in the world and that older women still have a meaningful role to play besides acting as the decorative symbol of goodness at home, as Tarbell would have it. Gilman’s placement of this story serves as one other strand of her argument on this point.

Gilman does not respond to Tarbell’s final entry of June 1912, “The Woman and Democracy,” in which Tarbell suggests that immigrant servant girls must be trained in moral American households (another patriotic reason, she claims, for women to stay at home) about the honor of labor and democratic principles. We think at our peril, Tarbell suggests, that “because the immigrant girl does not know our ways she knows nothing” (219). We must teach her to “preserve and develop that which she has learned at home” because she will ultimately be starting her own American household and must also raise thoughtful, voting, American sons (219). Perhaps Gilman chose not to take Tarbell on because she had already refuted the notion that people only seemed interested in raising voting sons in her earlier responses.

We might also recall that, through this whole dialogue, Gilman was serializing a revised *Human Work* (1904) as “Our Brains and What Ails Them” in the 1912 *Forerunner*. She recasts her concern with the ways that all economic relations shape our lives as human beings in the collective enterprise of life, the central thesis of *Human Work*. Instead, she examines how our brains are affected by various social practices and institutions, including tradition and authority, literature and journalism, religion and science, education and gender. In chapter 10, “What We do to the Child Mind,” Gilman claims that “no conditions are discovered more vitally important, more universal and continuous, than the educational conditions surrounding the first years of practically the whole human race” (279). By implication, as the locus of early childhood experience, she writes of the home not so much as she previously had, as a place of subordination of women, but rather as the place from which the best human development may grow. In the importance of the home, she and Tarbell agree. But their answers to where that importance lies and who should be participating in its implementation indicate their philosophical difference. For Gilman, the home launches the young into world service. It is also the place where young men and women are to be brought up as good citizens and future voters. For Tarbell, the home raises future male voters and nurtures and protects young women who must learn to replicate its traditions. That young women should not be brought up as equally active

participants in the work of the world, Gilman could simply not abide. Her response to Tarbell's "Uneasy Woman" series demonstrates that, for Gilman, woman's only significant uneasiness is the infantilizing, demoralizing, and demeaning notion that women should remain at home with no ambition other than replicating the boredom and disenfranchisement of their mothers. The manner in which Tarbell conducted her own life would seem to suggest a tacit agreement with Gilman's words rather than her own.¹¹

NOTES

1. Gary Scharnhorst explains that Gilman revised *Human Work* as "Our Brains and What Ails Them" (1912), "Humanness" (1913), and "Social Ethics" (1914) (all three are *Forerunner* serializations), then later as the unpublished "A Study in Ethics." Gilman was never fully satisfied with these efforts (60).

2. Larry Ceplair also notes additional Gilman responses to the Tarbell articles (192, 324nn18–19).

3. See Albert Jay Nock, "A New Science and Its Findings," *American Magazine* 73.5 (Mar. 1912): 577–83.

4. See Bettina Aptheker, *Lynching and Rape: An Exchange of Views* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1977).

5. See Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Noonday/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) for a history of Republican Motherhood and True Womanhood and their influence on American life in the nineteenth century.

6. For further discussion of class issues and their role in anti-suffrage arguments, see Susan E. Marshall, "In Defense of Separate Spheres: Class and Status Politics in the Anti-Suffrage Movement," *Social Forces* 65.2 (1986): 327–51.

7. Coincidentally, Phillips also was the publisher of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Human Work* (1904)—the very same book that Gilman chose to serialize as the re-named "Our Brains and What Ails Them" in the 1912 *Forerunner*, the same volume in which Gilman responds to Tarbell's "Uneasy Woman" series.

8. See Dana Gatlin, "Lady Gregory," *American Magazine* 73.5 (Mar. 1912): 550–53. Lady Gregory was a major figure in the Irish Literary Renaissance, founder of the famed Abbey Theatre, and mentor to its writers, including W. B. Yeats and John Millington Synge.

9. See H. G. Wells, "Marriage," *American Magazine* 73.5 (Mar. 1912): 604–16.

10. Although she often affects an amused tone when taking Tarbell to task, Gilman was considerably distressed by Tarbell's and the "Antis" power. She and several suffrage advocates (among them Tarbell and Gilman's mutual friend, Jane Addams) called for a mass meeting at the Metropolitan Temple in New York City to be held 15 April 1912.

Sadly, the *Titanic* sank on that date. The tragedy overwhelmed the media for several days thereafter, and there is no mention of the meeting in the New York newspapers.

11. With thanks to Deborah Cane for her gracious and most helpful comments and edits on the first draft of this essay.

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- . “Miss Tarbell’s ‘The Homeless Daughter.’” *Forerunner* 3 (May 1912): 120–21.
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Doing It “man-fashion”

Gender Performance in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Unpunished

JILL BERGMAN

Unpunished (c. 1929), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s posthumously published whodunit, poses some challenges for the reader. Having spent much of her life promoting women as agents of evolutionary change and practitioners of life-giving motherhood, in *Unpunished* Gilman gives us a story about murder at the hands of a woman and mother named Jack. More, the novel offers its approval of Jack’s use of violence as the solution to patriarchal injustices through the voices of several sympathetic characters. What can we make of this apparent flogging of her ideals? Gilman thought very highly of women’s potential to improve society; she depicted clear plans for woman-centered social progress in *What Diantha Did* (1910) and *The Crux* (1911), and she imagined a utopian matrifocal society in *Herland* (1915). By the 1920s, however, she seems to have been disappointed that women had made so little progress improving the human race. She speaks disparagingly of contemporary women in her nonfiction work, *His Religion and Hers* (1923): women today, she says, are “poor little slouchy creatures, painting their cheeks and powdering their noses . . . unutterably traitorous to the essential glory of their own sex” (236). In her final novel just a few years later, Gilman addresses her frustration over the condition of women through the creation of Jacqueline “Jack” Warner, a powerful, self-possessed contrast to those “slouchy creatures.” But Jack Warner is a complex figure, as Judith Butler’s model of gender performance, delineated in *Gender Trouble* (1990)

and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), will help us see. Briefly put, Butler argues that categories of sex and gender are constructions that appear to be natural due to their normalizing repetitions but that can be destabilized through reiterations that refuse to comply with the regulatory efforts of the dominant culture. This potential for flexibility seems to be precisely what Gilman proposes with *Unpunished*.

As a "cultural feminist" dedicated to a belief in essential differences between the genders, Gilman would seem an unlikely author to imagine and deploy gender fluidity in her fiction. Nevertheless, Gilman's Jack exemplifies aspects of Butler's poststructuralist model of gender performativity and subversion and in this way offers an important new context in which to read Gilman's work. As if finally persuaded of women's inability to defeat the formidable foe of patriarchy (what she called androcentric society), Gilman resorts to imagining women characters who can perform both genders and move fluidly between them, making use of patriarchy's tools. In what can be seen as either a disappointing or a strategic compromise to her woman-centered life's work, Gilman creates a cross-gendered character as her answer to patriarchy.

Unpunished begins with a detective's description of a recently discovered murder, but the back-story to this grisly event renders a bleak manifestation of the "man-made world," Gilman's name for society organized according to patriarchal values.¹ Sisters Jack and Iris have been raised under the controlling hand of a domineering father who demands the girls' obedience. When he tries to force Iris to marry his lawyer, Wade Vaughn, whom she neither loves nor respects, she refuses, with Jack's encouragement and support. The sisters leave home, and their father, outraged at their disobedience, cuts all ties with them and creates a will that leaves his entire estate to Vaughn. Eventually the sisters marry men they love and each has a child: Iris a daughter and Jack a son. After a tragic car accident kills both husbands and leaves Jack maimed and disabled, Vaughn steps in to care for the women and children. His motives for this kindness soon become apparent, however: while Jack is still unconscious, he takes advantage of Iris's state of shock and both women's economic vulnerability and marries Iris. When Jack regains consciousness and discovers their situation, Vaughn makes it clear that he will only provide for them if she agrees to stay on as manager of the house and if all agree to obey him, replicating in many ways the relationship the sisters had with their father. Since Jack has been physically disabled and Iris psychologically damaged as a result of the accident, Jack sees no option but to agree. Iris develops an escape mechanism to cope with her situation, drifting in and out of lucidity. Eventually, unable to bear life as Vaughn's wife any longer,

she completes her escape by committing suicide. Jack, on the other hand, embracing her responsibility to protect the children, determines to continue her life with Vaughn until she can find a viable means of escape for the three of them. She carries on as the children's mother and Vaughn's housekeeper for ten years or so, silently witnessing Vaughn's dealings with the "clients" of his legal practice (whom he blackmails) and enduring abuse at his hands. She coaches her son, Hal, and her niece, Iris, to bear their situation with the promise of eventual escape. And she keeps a journal—the vehicle for narrating this part of the novel—as a means of recording her experiences.

The family's situation does not resolve with reform. Rather, Gilman solves the problem of Wade Vaughn with murder. The discovery of Vaughn's dead body reveals that he has been poisoned, strangled, stabbed, shot, and bludgeoned—none of which, we later learn, has caused his death. The rest of the novel recounts the work of husband and wife amateur detectives, Jim and Bessie Hunt, as they attempt to solve the mystery of "whodunit," or in the case of this extraordinary murder, "whodunit" *first*. We eventually learn that Vaughn has died of heart failure as a result of Jack's theatrical appearance in the likeness of her dead sister, his dead wife, Iris. Finally free of their tyrannical patriarch, Jack, her niece, and her son flourish, and Jack goes "unpunished" for her act of vengeance and self-defense.

I. "A CRIPPLED RACE"

Unpunished resembles Gilman's previous novels in that, like the rest of her oeuvre, this novel explores and illustrates her theories of social evolution and the "development of human life" (Gilman, *Women* 1). Gilman believed that woman's progress would lead to the progress of the human species, and woman's degeneration would, conversely, lead to its decline. In *His Religion and Hers* (1923), she cites evidence of this decline, arguing that "the inverted relation of the sexes" posed the "greatest obstacle to social progress" (58). Indeed, she claims, "by the early and universal subjection of the female to the male, by her segregation to the lowest form of service and to an exaggerated sex-development, we have made ourselves a crippled race, a race whose whole development was left to be carried on by one half of it" (202–03).² Gilman had raised this critique nearly two decades earlier in *What Diantha Did* (1910), a novel she serialized in her publication, *The Forerunner*. The novel depicts a young man whose father's sudden death leaves him to support his mother—a pale, languid woman who spends her time crocheting afghans, a pointless project for the temperate California climate—and four primarily

ornamental sisters who prefer to be supported by their brother than to support themselves. The women's behavior stems from expectations typical of women of their class, expectations that have evolved over time. Language of weakness or illness justifies the daughters' inactivity: "Madeline was 'delicate,' and Adeline was 'frail'; Cora was 'nervous'" (Gilman, *Diantha* 32). Significantly, Gilman titles the chapter introducing these five women who contribute nothing to their household or society "Handicapped."

Gilman argues her point from another angle in her utopian novel, *Herland*. If women evolved into a "handicapped" state by years of patriarchal control, she argues, that condition could be reversed and women's physical and mental abilities greatly enhanced if the course of evolution could be redirected. Here, far from physically and mentally hampered, Herland inhabitants embody ideal traits of health and fitness, temperament and intelligence. Gilman compares the development of such an advanced group of women to the careful cultivation of plants. Unlike U.S. society, where evolution was allowed to be influenced by the selfish or unhealthy desires and drives of the male population, in the utopian (and male-free) setting of Herland, the residents carefully manipulate evolution in order to cultivate the strongest possible female progeny. The tables of control turned, Gilman underscores the detrimental and long-term effects of occupying a position of weakness in society through Terry, a male visitor to Herland and the novel's representative of excessive masculinity. Terry chafes under the control of women and he develops symptoms of "nerves," much as "The Yellow Wall-Paper" narrator had, when he no longer enjoys the power over women to which he is accustomed (*Herland* 77). With this development, Gilman indicates that the weakness often found in women stems from their subjection to men, not from any essential traits of their sex.

Gilman builds on these previous works with *Unpunished*, where she again takes up her critique of the "crippled race." She consolidates the evils of patriarchy into primarily one character, Vaughn, and patriarchy's effects on women into two representative characters, Iris and Jack. Vaughn, whose character unfolds largely through Jack's account of him in her journal, takes great pleasure in subjecting Jack, Iris, and others to his control, relishing "power for its own sake" (96). By concealing their father's deathbed will, which would restore their fortune, Vaughn maintains Iris's and Jack's economic dependence on him, a key feature of patriarchal control, as Gilman had long argued.³ Through blackmail, he keeps his clients in his economic power as well. He attempts to transform one client into property, urging her to sell herself in order to comply with his financial demands: "As handsome a woman as you are, my dear . . . can always find ways of getting money"

(159). He also makes his step-daughter a commodity by selling her to an employee (168). As a lawyer, Vaughn augments his power through the power of the law, using this institution to enforce his patriarchal control over others.

A dramatic contrast to the powerful Vaughn, Gilman's Iris and Jack emerge as extreme, almost metaphorical, illustrations of the "crippled" condition of women caused by patriarchy's influence on evolution. The male's position of power having perverted the species' natural selection process, a man can now choose a mate for her fragility—a trait that will not threaten his authority. Gilman explains: "As a male he is appealed to by the ultra-feminine, and has given small thought to effects on the race. He was not designed to do the selecting. Under his fostering care we have bred a race of women who are physically weak enough to be handed about like invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend they are—and to like it" (*Man-Made* 58). Jack's and Iris's respective conditions pointedly illustrate Gilman's claim. Jack, virtually an invalid, spends most of her time in a wheelchair and must be carried up and down stairs, most often by Vaughn or her son, Hal. Her physical condition not too subtly underlines Gilman's claim that "we have made ourselves a crippled race" (*His* 202–03). Meanwhile, Iris suffers from mental weakness. Shock over the death of her husband, upon whom she depended, causes her "almost to lose her mind" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 74–75); her forced marriage to Vaughn completes the job. Jack explains in her journal, "Of course she wasn't responsible [for her marriage to Vaughn]. Her mind was a blank with irregular patches of memory, all unrelated. . . . He told her anything he wanted to. . . . He took her to the city hall, got the license, they were married by the mayor, and Iris no more responsible than a baby" (76). With their mental and physical damage, both characters serve as glaring examples of "the product of men's misuse of womanhood" (Gilman, *His* 237).

If *Unpunished* resembles Gilman's other novels in its attention to the effects of evolution, however, two important elements signal its diversion from her earlier works. First, Iris seems to be irreparably weak. As the floral name suggests, "Iris" represents fragile beauty lacking utility. Jack, who describes herself as "by no means naturally submissive" (83), indicates that Iris, by contrast, *is* naturally submissive. This statement comes as a surprise, given Gilman's insistence that submission, like other weak traits associated with femininity, has evolved as a result of women's position in an androcentric society and is, therefore, learned rather than inborn. And yet Iris's condition is natural and, as such, presumably irrevocable. In addition to her submission, Iris exhibits excessive dependence. Jack declares that Iris "was always such a . . . dependent little thing," needing Jack's care when they

were both children (76, 77). Later, when Jack engineers the escape from their father's control and manages to earn her living as an actress, Iris, still dependent, is "saved any real privation" by marriage (74). As we might expect, her daughter shares her mother's weak qualities. Indeed, marked by a shared name (Iris), mother and daughter become almost indistinguishable, flat types more than round characters. At age eighteen, the young Iris sits "huddled small and pale in her big chair" like a child, "tearful and agitated," as she tells her "pathetic little story" at the inquest (120, 122). Both Irises need to be cared for; they exhibit little hope of surviving under the patriarchy, much less of defeating it.

Second, and perhaps prompted by the seemingly irrevocable character of the Irises' weakness, the novel differs from Gilman's previous fiction by responding to the problems caused by centuries of patriarchal control with murder rather than with such reform innovations as Gilman had developed over the years. Had she given up hope in the possibilities afforded by her previous visions? Does *Unpunished* mark a metaphorical throwing up of her hands at the hopelessness of a peaceable achievement of gender equality and human progress? Gilman's turn to murder becomes more surprising when we set the novel alongside her nonfiction work, *His Religion and Hers*, published just a few years before she wrote *Unpunished*.⁴ In addition to revisiting many of her familiar and previously explored theories, *His Religion and Hers* identifies a crucial gender difference deriving from religion, which Gilman understands to be "the strongest modifying influence in our conscious behavior" (preface, n.p.). Prompted by the violence of World War I, "our last great backsliding into warfare," Gilman claims that, rather than improving the human condition in this earthly, present-day life, religion exhibits a "primitive preoccupation with death and after-death" (preface, n.p.), a preoccupation she attributes to men. As she explains, the "most widely entertained religious misconceptions rest on a morbid preoccupation with death and 'another world' . . . mainly due to the fact that they have been introduced and developed by one sex only, the male, in whose life as a hunter and fighter death was the impressive crisis." In contrast, "the female, the impressive crises of whose life is birth, has an essentially different outlook, much more in line with social progress" (6). Women, with their orientation toward life, should be best suited for improving the world, for bringing about progress, but men's religious fascination with preparedness for death has led humankind to neglect its own condition and the improvement of life on this earth (11–14). Gilman ends the preface to *His Religion and Hers* dramatically and movingly: "War has 'rous[ed] anew that ancient fever of misplaced anxiety—death, death; and where is the dead man?" (preface, n.p.). In *Unpunished*, we find him in his office.

II. "WHERE IS THE DEAD MAN?"

In this novel Gilman sets up a familiar conflict, one whose cause can be traced to the imbalance of power between men and women in an androcentric society. But rather than resolving the conflict through one of her optimistic, reform-oriented solutions—such as sex education for young women in *The Crux* or a housekeeping service and community kitchen in *What Diantha Did*—here Gilman eliminates the conflict with murder. Scholars have judged this as liberatory, seeing it as an instance of the abused actively retaliating against her abuser. They have compared it to Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," a story featuring "a protofeminist perspective" and the "almost archetypal act of murder-as-liberation" (Mellard 145).⁵ If "Jury" celebrates a "parallel system of justice, one in which women can be judged according to context and truly by their peers" (Hallgren 204), *Unpunished*, too, can be seen as an exploration of a morality that refuses to accept the Law of the Father and instead metes out its own justice. The text explicitly theorizes justice and crime, raising the possibility of an alternative form of justice and a code of morality positioned outside the law. This alternative justice emerges in an exchange between the novel's husband and wife detective team as they speculate on the guilt of Vaughn's family:

"[I]f they did it, I don't blame them a particle!"

"You've lost your moral sense, my poor girl. Don't you know murder is a crime?"

"That's all very pretty, Jim, but there isn't a crime in the calendar to equal that man's slow cruelty. And his use of his power over those poor 'clients' of his! He was worse than Jack the Ripper." (Gilman, *Unpunished* 135)

Bessie's dismissal of the law as "pretty" indicates her assessment of its doubtful value, since, as she points out, "it's no crime, under the law, to torment two children and a helpless woman" as Vaughn did (95). She expresses this assessment more forcefully in answer to Jim's invocation of "due process of law." "Law! Huh!" she pointedly replies (42). In this case, she believes that true justice resides in Vaughn's murder as the means of ending his cruelty to those caught in his power with no legal recourse.⁶

Characters' feelings about Vaughn's death slip from approval to desire to relish, however, raising questions about Gilman's earlier critique of the masculine preoccupation with death. Everyone seems to want a piece of Vaughn. In addition to Jack's having fatally frightened him, five others have tried to

kill Vaughn through poisoning, strangulation, shooting, stabbing, and bludgeoning, and those who did not kill him wish they had. The elderly neighbor Mrs. Todd who, thanks to her penchant for voyeurism and a good pair of binoculars, has witnessed Vaughn's cruelty over the years, exclaims, "I wish I'd had a gun—a rifle!" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 37). After hearing the details of Vaughn's mistreatment of Jack and her family, detectives Jim and Bessie agree:

"I regret that Mr. Vaughn is dead, that's all," he answered; "so I cannot have the pleasure of killing him. Of all sub-human criminals!"

"Augustus Crasher is not dead! Yet!" said Bessie ominously. (113)

Mrs. Todd wants a good sized weapon; Jim longs for the "pleasure" of killing; and Bessie, having missed the opportunity to murder Vaughn, ponders the possibility of killing his business partner as consolation. Surely the novel's pleasure in death and the blood lust in particular on the part of female characters Bessie, Mrs. Todd, and Jack cast doubt on Gilman's dream that "a normal feminine influence in recasting our religious assumptions (specifically our preoccupation with death) will do more than any other one thing to improve the world" (*His* 6–7). Of course, Iris had already caused us to doubt this dream, an utterly powerless character who exercises very little "influence," feminine or otherwise. All the pieces in this novel, then, come together to push the reader toward favoring the masculine as a site of power and possibility and away from what has become the abject feminine.

III. "DO IT MAN-FASHION"

Enter Jack: a character who crosses gender lines by moving easily between behaviors and traits that are coded masculine and those that are coded feminine. How did Gilman get here? Certainly in her earlier works Gilman had put pressure on accepted theories of gender. While she credits the notion of "natural" qualities belonging to males and females, she challenges commonly held assumptions about which qualities rightly belong to whom and argues, as we have seen, that certain traits typically coded as masculine—such as strength and intelligence—could be cultivated in women through careful manipulation of the evolutionary process. But with Jack, an actor by trade who moves, chameleon-like, between various gender roles, Gilman takes a different approach. A possible explanation for this shift lies in her skepticism about women's capabilities by the time she wrote *Unpunished*. After nearly

forty years of speaking and writing about her vision, she must have found it frustrating to see so little progress, as her depiction of the frail Irises seems to indicate.⁷ Even the recent victory of the vote of 1919—an apparently clear indication of many women’s commitment to and achievement of progress—Gilman judged as mere dedication to the pursuit of individual gain, rather than the advancement of the community or humanity, and she characterizes it as a sign of “a distinctly masculine ‘self-expression’” rather than the much-needed “feminine sense of duty to the race” (*His* 9). Some years earlier, while advocating the need for a feminine influence in “the man-made world,” she had derisively ventriloquized men, expressing what she believed to be their strategy for countering the supposed threat of society’s “feminization”:

We are men. Men are human beings. Women are only women. This is a man’s world. To get on in it you must do it man-fashion—i.e., fight, and overcome the others. Being civilized in part, we must arrange a sort of “civilized warfare,” and learn to play the game, the old crude, fierce male game of combat, and we must educate our boys thereto. (*Man-Made* 129)

Assuming the voice of men and—in that voice—acknowledging their only partial civilization, she ridiculed this position. But by 1929, ironically, she seems ready to try out the advice she has mocked. She reaches back to the notion of “doing it man-fashion.” Equating gender with fashion as something one dons or assumes, Gilman gives us in Jack a character willing and able to assume or perform the “fashion” of masculinity.⁸

Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity, analyzing the workings of power in the arena of gender, provides a useful model for thinking about Gilman’s Jack as a practitioner of “man-fashion.” As she examines the ways in which subjects attempt to negotiate their position in relation to gender, Butler identifies the possibilities—and impossibilities—of resistance. According to Butler, sex and gender are normative fictions—“regulatory ideals”—that are constructed, regulated, and constrained through the “reiterative power of discourse” (*Bodies* 1–2). The reiteration of these fictions occurs through “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (*Gender* 43). As individuals experience and participate in these “repeated acts,” they produce and are produced as compliant subjects in the maintenance of the normative fictions of gender. Performativity as Butler describes it is not necessarily as malleable nor as empowering as Gilman’s notion of “fashion” suggests. She insists that drag, for example, can function as “both the denaturalization and reidealization” of gender norms (*Bodies* 125). Nevertheless, a modicum of agency exists for the subject. Jack’s

gender play, her inhabiting of several gender manifestations, enables her to "try on" masculinity, or "man-fashion," as a means of challenging the power of the law, even if ultimately her performance fails to alter the law it seeks to oppose.

Therefore, while the adoption of "man-fashion" may be seen as a compromise, we can also recognize it as an attempt at subversion. Gender performance and "doing it man-fashion" permeate *Unpunished*, and not only in the preoccupation with death and killing, something Gilman had earlier defined as a masculine trait. While Jack embodies Gilman's ideals of the capability of women and the power of motherhood, she also exhibits masculine traits and moves fluidly between genders. Indeed, it seems that Iris's lack of gender fluidity and her inability to resist the Law's normative fictions for acceptable gender explain her extreme weakness and ultimate defeat. In a very optimistic rendition of Butler's theory, gender fluidity saves Jack. In that fluidity resides the potential power of this novel.

The novel sets the stage, so to speak, for the performance of gender with numerous references to drama and dissimulation. When she first leaves her father's home, Jack makes her living as an actor. Her dramatic skill, we understand, prepares her for the feat of performance required of her and the children while living under Vaughn's authority. She explains in her journal that their behavior is "steady acting" and "is like a play—a dreadful weary play that has no curtain" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 92, 91). She describes the kiss required of her by Vaughn, apparently inappropriately passionate for a brother-in-law, as a "horrible moving picture kiss" (90). Even the character's name, Jack Warner, invokes the president of a major site of role playing—Warner Brothers Studios in Hollywood, formed in 1918 (Robinson 280). And Jack isn't the only one engaging in dissimulation: private detective Bessie Hunt goes undercover, playing the role of a maid as part of her investigation, while the younger Iris feels herself to be taking part in an "old fashioned melodrama" in the aftermath of the murder (Gilman, *Unpunished* 118). Instances of and references to performance highlight the ongoing drama of gender performance enacted by Jack in response to the Law, represented by Vaughn.

Vaughn's power requires that Iris and Jack become compliant subjects in order to exist and thrive. "The 'law,'" says Butler, "can only remain a law to the extent that it compels the differentiated citations and approximations called 'feminine' and 'masculine'" (*Bodies* 15). Vaughn, lawyer, keeper of the will, and patriarch—both as Iris's husband and as the stand-in for Iris and Jack's father—functions as an agent of both the law and the Law of the Father. His forced marriage to Iris shortly after the death of her first husband

brings into play “a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability” (Butler, *Bodies* 14–15). As a wife, Iris finds herself in the untenable position of occupying a gender role that she cannot bear, a role that requires at the very least that she love, honor, and obey her husband. This injunction’s “threat” of psychosis makes good: Iris has already descended into occasional bouts of psychosis in the form of detachment from her reality. In the following scene, Vaughn attempts to police Iris’s compliance with the expectations of her as a wife by adding to the “threat of psychosis” the threat of exposure:

My dear wife . . . I think you are still intelligent enough to realize that your nervous condition has its dangers. If you care to remain at home with your sister and your child you must be calmer, more naturally affectionate, more obedient. If you make any noise or disturbance of any sort I am sure that an examining physician would quite agree with me that—restraint was necessary, and seclusion. You need sleep my dear. Come back to bed. (Gilman, *Unpunished* 88)

Vaughn invokes the “normativizing injunction” of the “natural” traits of wife and mother: calm, affectionate, obedient. He threatens Iris with removal based on the authority of medical discourse and then summons her “back to bed,” a reminder of the sexual behavior he expects of her. As we have seen, his tactics succeed in forcing her compliance for a time. She manages only limited resistance through her occasional episodes of oblivion. Her ultimate resistance, her “escape” through suicide (89), recalls the narrator in Gilman’s famous story of three decades earlier, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” whose escape from patriarchal oppression bears similar marks of psychosis.⁹ Such an escape is, of course, also defeat. In contrast, Jack exercises resistance far more successfully than Iris in the form of what Butler calls the “parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings” (*Gender* 44).

Names play an important part in the proliferation of gendered meanings in the drama between the Law (Vaughn) and the subject (Jack). As Butler explains, “the name is a token of a symbolic order, an order of social law, that which legislates viable subjects through the institution of sexual difference” (*Bodies* 152). The character of Jack, however, appears in *Unpunished* with several names, and this proliferation works to undermine the project of legislating a viable, compliant subject (*Bodies* 124). Jack first appears in the novel as “Mrs. Warner,” her married name. “Mrs. Warner” signals gender compliance, signifying both the legal act of marriage and the contingency of her identity on the man she married. The subject constructed by this citation

has no identity of its own without being contingent on another person, and as such, the name signifies expropriation, the relinquishing of identity. "Mrs. Warner" is simply, in Butler's terms, an "abbreviation for a social pact or symbolic order that structures the subjects named through their position in a patrilineal social structure" (Butler, *Bodies* 154). Throughout all legal proceedings connected with Vaughn's murder, the coroner and various witnesses use the appellation "Mrs. Warner," situating her within her proper relationship to the law and to her expected gender role, her name "not only bear[ing] the law, but institut[ing] the law" (154). "Mrs. Warner," then, functions as a name of compliance.

In another citation, Jack introduces herself in her journal as "Jacqueline," her given name. This is the name Vaughn uses for her in the events recounted in her journal. The feminine counterpart to the name "Jack," Jacqueline, when linked to "Iris," suggests the tea rose, Jacqueminot. These floral names connote fragility and ornamentation—qualities Iris certainly possesses, as we have seen. Vaughn's use of this name signals his attempts to link Jacqueline to Iris's weakness. Significantly, he also strategically ensures Jack's weakness and dependence by refusing her the proper medical care after her accident, thus keeping her physically disabled. His words to Jack indicate the expected outcome of his actions and recall Gilman's thesis that women's oppression derives from their economic dependence: "It is sadly evident that you are in no shape to earn a decent living for yourself and your boy" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 78). With the name "Jacqueline," Vaughn casts Jack in an acceptable feminine position of frailty and dependence, reminding her that she is his to tend and cultivate, like a flower. By applying this appellation to herself, Jacqueline signals her compliance in assuming the role as a victim of Vaughn's abuse and a mother sacrificing herself for her children.

The name "Jacqueline" is complicated, however, in that it also contains its opposite, Jack, a "crossing that is, it seems, at work in every identificatory practice" and that raises the possibility of undermining the hegemonic power in "Jacqueline" (Butler, *Bodies* 143). Over the course of the story, "Jack" becomes the primary name for this character. The first use of the word comes from Mrs. Todd, who had earlier deployed it with different meaning: "I could recognize folks if they didn't take pains to hide their faces," complains the elderly voyeur. "But they did, every man-jack of them, and women more so" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 36). The phrase "man-jack" refers to every single person, but it connotes male persons, particularly in this case, when Mrs. Todd distinguishes "every man-jack" from women. The second occurrence of this word, this time specifically as a name, comes from an exchange between Jack and Iris, recounted in Jack's journal:

She rushed into my room one night, in her little foolish lacy nightdress with tiny ribbon rosebuds on it—he was always buying her things he thought pretty. She was at her worst, that meant at her best, her mind clear and remembering everything, and then the dreadful sense of her position. She was all shivering and sobbing . . .

“Oh Jack! Jack! I can’t! I can’t! Keep me! Hide me!” (87)

In this highly charged scene, Iris begs Jack for protection from Vaughn’s sexual advances. As her husband, Vaughn has a legal right to expect sex from Iris, an expectation he emphasizes by dressing her in lingerie. Iris appeals to Jack to help her escape the authority of the law, both the law of the state that gives Vaughn ownership of his wife’s body and the law of her father, who had tried to give Iris to Vaughn years earlier. Set against Iris’s “pretty” and helpless femininity, Jack occupies the masculine role of protector. Moreover, as Iris looks to Jack for physical protection, much as she might appeal to a lover, this scene becomes weighted with sexual overtones. At play here is a love triangle, as Jack and Vaughn compete for power over Iris. In this way, according to a heterosexual paradigm, Jack occupies a masculine position, one almost on par with Vaughn. In both senses, then, the name “Jack” signifies a noncompliant role, a gendered position outside the one dictated by the law of the father, and as such enacts a “rupture” or “rearticulation” of the law’s authority (Butler, *Bodies* 122). This character’s use of various names draws attention to the multiple gendered actions she engages in and thus works to destabilize the regulatory ideals of gender.

By assuming the role of Iris’s and the children’s protector and by performing a level of emotional strength traditionally considered to be masculine, Jack so successfully performs the male gender that those around her view it as both acceptable and unremarkable. Relating the discovery of Vaughn’s body, one observer contrasts Jack’s behavior with that of women: “Miss Iris [the daughter] became hysterical. . . . It was a ghastly sight for women. Mrs. Warner kept her head” (Gilman, *Unpunished* 147). While women find Vaughn’s body to be a ghastly sight, Jack, rhetorically set apart from women, does not find it so. Here she performs masculinity so convincingly that it infiltrates and muddies the meaning of her role as “Mrs. Warner,” investing even that compliant name with subversive potential. Similarly, Bessie Hunt contrasts her with the “ordinary woman”: “You take an ordinary woman and if she has to chloroform a kitten she is all white and wretched—upset.” Meanwhile, Hunt continues, Jack has trained herself to endure Vaughn’s treatment. Her experience has been so difficult “that a murder or two—if thrown in—would not have shaken her” (137). Bessie’s comparison marks

Jack as an *extraordinary* woman, but by placing her so far outside the boundaries of compliant gender to the point that she would easily engage in murder, she links her behavior to masculinity, specifically the masculine preoccupation with death.

If her various names serve as a means for Jack to manipulate her expected gender roles, her very body registers flexibility and possible manipulation, thus gesturing toward her ability to inhabit a variety of roles. Once a "good looking girl" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 143), she is now disfigured by the automobile accident. Amateur detective Jim Hunt describes her: "Dark soft hair. Dark eyes, shade over one eye. Puckered scar on cheek—pulls her mouth up on one side. She must have been badly cut up in that accident and it was pretty poorly patched I should say" (12). At the end of the story, having recovered the money taken by Vaughn by finding her father's hidden will, she arranges to have reconstructive surgery. She promises her friend she'll return in the form of "another ladye, exactly to your taste" (194).¹⁰ True to her word, Jack returns a changed woman. A former servant exclaims, "It's beautiful you are, Miss Jack! As beautiful as the day! And stepping like a girl at a dance" (201). Jack's shape shifting reinforces her ability to inhabit various gender roles. Here she has gained the capacity to behave "like a girl." The name "Miss Jack" suggests freedom from the legally compliant "Mrs. Warner" and effectively blurs the line between her feminine and masculine gender roles.

The most powerful instance of gender manipulation occurs with the mystery's climax: the moment of discovery, revealing who committed the murder and how. Once Vaughn's numerous injuries have been accounted for, the coroner reveals that none of these caused Vaughn's death: he died of heart failure. After the inquest and the closing of the case, however, Jack confides to her friends that she prompted Vaughn's heart failure by appearing to him in the figure of his dead wife, Iris. In a moment of heightened drama, Jack offers for her friends an encore of the scene she performed for Vaughn that night:

There appeared in the doorway and stood looking steadily at them, not Jacqueline, but Iris her sister. Iris of the soft bright hair, the perfect features, the tender and small mouth. She wore a soft blue frock, but her color was not rosy; it was death-white. Her eyes stared dim and blank. Around her neck was tightly tied one end of a long black and white silk scarf. (206)

Long skilled as a performer—both on stage and off, as we have seen—Jack performs the role of Iris. Significantly, Iris's physical features define her:

soft hair, tender mouth, smallness, perfection. At Iris's death, Jack's efforts to remember Iris have focused on the physical traits. She kept the clothes Iris wore and made a death-mask because Iris "was so beautiful" (207). If Iris's compliant performance of her gender had destroyed her, Jack turns this compliance against Vaughn in revenge, making a murder weapon of parodic repetition. In this crucial replay of her macabre performance for Vaughn, Jack—in drag as the compliant woman—parodies Iris's compliance and thus enacts a "refusal of law through parodic inhabiting of conformity" (Butler, *Bodies* 122). In a moment of supreme power, Jack's parody of the compliant woman kills Vaughn, representative of the Law of the Father.

IV. CONCLUSION

A murder mystery full of bloodthirsty characters, *Unpunished* represents a significant shift from the sentiment expressed in *His Religion and Hers*. Perhaps despairing over the ongoing powerlessness of women, Gilman sets up Jack—a multiply gendered character—as her ideal. Does this ideal achieve all Gilman would have hoped? Probably not. As Butler makes clear, "resistance thwarts the law in its effects, but cannot redirect the law or its effects. Resistance . . . is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes" (*Psychic* 98). In her critique of *Unpunished*, Robinson rightly points out that "the patriarch is done in, but patriarchy is not" (282). Gilman's, or Jack's, gender play cannot be credited with more than it manages. Nonetheless, while patriarchy still exists at the novel's end, its authority, its very ability to enforce gender compliance, has been challenged by a cross-gendered Jack, maybe the only character Gilman could imagine who could handle the task of "doing it man-fashion." Jack assumes an extreme range of genders. In a meeting with three murder suspects who had been Vaughn's servants, Jack comforts one of the suspects for an inadvertent murder committed while fleeing the scene of Vaughn's death. "He wasn't much loss, as far as I could gather," states Jack callously. Moments later, she sits "hugging the baby" of another suspect (Gilman, *Unpunished* 199–200). The juxtaposition in this tableau of murder conspirator and mother figure neatly summarizes Jack's gender complexity in her dual role as mother and murderer. So while *Unpunished* may contradict Gilman's earlier theories, it also poses a challenge to gender compliance. Unable to identify a solution to what she called a "crippled race," in the novel Gilman engages in her own act of parody, dishing out death in "man-fashion" as an answer.

NOTES

1. Gilman's nonfiction work *The Man-Made World* builds upon Lester F. Ward's "Gynaecocentric Theory," which held, as Gilman put it, "that the female is the race type, and the male, originally but a sex type, reaching a later equality with the female and, in the human race, becoming her master for a considerable historic period" (23).

2. Gilman's use of the word "race" bears some explanation. Here, she refers to the human race, calling upon her long-time interest in human social evolution or progress. In *Women and Economics*, for example, she uses the terms "species" and "race" interchangeably as she theorizes human progress with analogies to animals and insects. As Gilman explains, we "study the development of human life as we study the evolution of species throughout the animal kingdom" (*Women* 1). Gilman employs such an analogy to signal her interest in evolution early in *Unpunished* with a statement by Bessie Hunt, one of the amateur sleuths on the case: "'I may be ignorant,' she remarked with some acerbity, 'but at least I know enough not to call a spider 'he,' not a working spider'" (43). Gilman typically supported her arguments about the rightful role of women in society with examples from the animal or insect world in which the female of the species is the more productive. Invoking the female spider as the working member of the species, she reminds her readers of women's "natural" superiority, referring in this case to women of the species as a whole, part of her wider interest in the "progress of the race"—humanity—as a whole (*Women* 8).

Elsewhere in her work, Gilman deploys the word "race" to signify what Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as the "racialist" notion, held by "educated Victorians," that the human race could be divided into "a small number of groups, called 'races,'" sharing "certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they did not share with members of any other race" (276). In addition to her deep interest in the progress of humanity as a whole, Gilman believed that "the study of the world must turn on an understanding of races and their relative degree of advancement," a fallacious notion that conflates Social Darwinism and evolution (qtd. in Knight 165). Denise D. Knight offers a thorough and compelling discussion of Gilman's troubling views on "the deep, wide, lasting differences between the races" (161). Indeed, her use of racial stereotypes in her treatment of an Italian character in *Unpunished* is symptomatic of this problem. Knowing of her bias, it seems clear that her interest in "human progress" probably centers in fact on a narrow set of white humanity. Therefore, we can assume that when she uses the phrase "crippled race" to refer to the impeded social progress of the broader human race as a result of patriarchal institutions, as quoted here, she refers implicitly—even inadvertently—to the Anglo-Saxon "race."

3. Gilman published her well-received book *Women and Economics* in 1898.

4. In her biography of Gilman, Ann J. Lane points out, "Never in any other piece of fiction did Gilman eliminate a villain with such direct violence. In this detective novel, Gilman triumphs over an evil male authority figure, not by persuasion or by gentle manipulation, but by destruction" (343).

5. For a discussion of the novel's treatment of domestic abuse and the comparison to Glaspell's "Jury of her Peers," see Catherine J. Golden and Denise D. Knight's "No

Good Deed Goes *Unpunished*? Victims, Villains, and Vigilantes in Gilman's Detective Novel," *Clues* 22.1 (2001): 101–18, as well as their afterword to *Unpunished*.

6. Jack, too, theorizes an alternative form of justice: "Crime! How do you measure crime? By the harm done, for one thing. By the pressure driving to it—even the law allows for that. For utter case-hardened inborn highly-developed criminality I never knew any man to equal Wade Vaughn" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 203).

7. Lillian Robinson argues that Gilman felt discouraged by the waning women's movement of her day and her own decreasing popularity (276–77). Similarly, Lane speculates that with *Unpunished*, "Gilman gave in to the frustration she felt at having devoted a life to struggling for changes that did not occur" (344).

8. We find an earlier indication of Gilman's awareness of the possibilities of gender performance in an 1881 letter to Martha Luther. There she imagined going "man-fashion"—i.e. donning a disguise—in order to release herself from work obligations that tied her to her home when she wished to be free (Gilman, *Selected Letters* 10).

9. James Mellard makes a similar observation about Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers." Golden and Knight have argued that with *Unpunished* Gilman offers a corrective to her earlier story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." See their Afterword.

10. Although editors Golden and Knight do not identify the source for this quotation, based on Gilman's love of theater they speculate that it comes from a play.

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NEW CONTEXTS

“There are things in that paper that
nobody knows but me”

An Alternative Reading of Neurasthenia¹

JENNIFER LUNDEN

In 1888, an urbanite mischievously named Frangipani Soot² wrote a letter to the editor of the Milwaukee *Sentinel* lamenting one of the overarching effects of early industrialism, smoke: “It penetrates our houses, it befouls the atmosphere, spoils everything, benefits nothing. . . . My clothes are dirtied by this smoke. I swallow it. It fills my eyes, chokes my bronchial tubes. It comes between me and the sun and I see my fellow beings suffer day by day” (qtd. in Stradling 22). And just as smoke pervaded factory cities like Milwaukee, early industrial capitalism permeated the minds and bodies of Americans. In his 1871 book, *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked*, famed neurologist S. Weir Mitchell asserted his conviction that the new and sudden demands of modernity were taking their toll. He blamed “cruel competition for the dollar, the new and exacting habits of business, the racing speed which the telegraph and railway have introduced into commercial life, the new value which great fortunes have come to possess as means toward social advancement, and the overeducation and overstraining of our young people” for precipitating “some great and growing evils” (9).

In the shadow of this industrial advancement, a mysterious epidemic was sweeping the country. Its symptoms were not fatal but left sufferers in a state that sometimes felt closer to death than to life. Almost no bodily system was spared. Victims suffered headaches, insomnia, digestive problems, chronic pain, anxiety, inability to concentrate, and vertigo. Inexplicable, debilitating

fatigue sent many to their beds. They sank into dark depressions. Physicians were at a loss to produce an effective treatment.

In 1869 neurologist George M. Beard gave this diverse set of symptoms a name: neurasthenia.³ Like Mitchell, he attributed the rising health problems to the rapid rate of progress. In particular, he implicated advances such as “steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women” (96).⁴

Of course, one of the most mentally active women of the times was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Fiction writer, poet, and social critic, Gilman devoted her life to mental activity. And she, too, was struck down by this terrible illness. In 1884, at age twenty-four, while pregnant with her first and only child, Katharine, Gilman commenced the rapid decline into poor health that would later be identified as neurasthenia. She wrote in her memoir, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, that she suffered from a “helpless gloom” (290), inability to concentrate, loss of appetite and weight loss, and fatigue so profound that “the knife and fork sank from my hands—too tired to eat” (91). She said she could not “read nor write nor paint nor sew nor talk nor listen to talking, nor anything. I lay on that lounge and wept all day. . . . A constant dragging weariness miles below zero. Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery” (91).

On the advice of her doctor, who suggested she try a change of scenery, she weaned her daughter and took the train to California. Remarkably, she felt better “from the moment the wheels began to turn, the train to move” (92). She blossomed in California, so much so that “I was taken for a vigorous young girl” (94). But on the train ride home, she caught a “heavy bronchial cold” and it “hung on long, the dark fog rose again in my mind, the miserable weakness—within a month I was as low as before leaving.” She couldn’t help but note that she was “well while away and sick while at home” (95).

For all intents and purposes, it appears to be domesticity that was wearing her down. Certainly it is easy, especially for contemporary feminists, to imagine how a mundane life of cooking and cleaning and tending a baby might sap an intelligent woman’s strength and spirit. Taking to her bed might be a way out. In the nineteenth century it might have looked like the only way out.

Gilman, in her desperation, sought the care of esteemed neurasthenia specialist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. He prescribed his famous “Rest Cure,” and Gilman was put to bed at his sanitarium, where a nurse bathed and massaged her and spoon-fed her a diet consisting primarily of milk. Like other Rest Cure patients, Gilman was restricted to complete bed rest, forbidden even

to read, write, or sew. (This was the standard protocol under Mitchell's Rest Cure; it is fair to assume it was Gilman's treatment, also.) After a month in Mitchell's sanitarium Gilman recovered her vigor, and Mitchell sent her home, admonishing her to "[l]ive as domestic a life as possible. . . . Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live" (96).

Like any good Victorian woman, Gilman did her best to follow doctor's orders: "I went home, followed those directions rigidly for months, and came perilously close to losing my mind" (96). Finally, she saw no other solution but to leave her husband. In 1888 she fled her domestic life in the East, moving west to become an influential, prolific writer and lecturer. In what she describes as "that first year of freedom," Gilman published thirty-three articles, twenty-three poems, and ten children's verses (111).

A common misconception is that Gilman's neurasthenia was cured when she left the confines of domesticity and sought her own path as an independent woman. If this were true, it would certainly appear to support the idea that Gilman's illness was a psychological reaction to her assigned gender role. But despite her feminism, her ambition, and her powerful work ethic, Gilman never really did fully recover. Here is what she describes of her experience in her autobiography:

To step so suddenly from proud strength to contemptible feebleness, from cheerful stoicism to whimpering avoidance of any strain or irritation for fear of the collapse ensuing, is not pleasant, at twenty-four. To spend forty years and more in the patient effort of learning how to carry such infirmity so as to accomplish something in spite of it is a wearing process, full of mortification and deprivation (*Living* 100).⁵

What caused this terrible malaise? What was it that was making Gilman and other Victorians so profoundly sick? Contemporary scholars have amply analyzed the psychosocial forces that were likely to have contributed to the rise of the mysterious malady.⁶ Critics both then and now have described neurasthenia as a "fashionable illness."⁷ Some have suggested that neurasthenia grew "popular" due to its status as a mark of refinement, noting Beard's patriotic conviction that the rise of neurasthenia distinguished the U.S. as an advanced civilization and his assertion that the illness was most prevalent among "brain-workers."⁸ Others suggest that women assumed the illness as an expression of genteel femininity, or describe it as a kind of rebellion against gender roles that relieved women of their tedious housekeeping chores and offered a reprieve from sexual duties and the associated risks of

childbirth.⁹ Even *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* currently identifies neurasthenia as “an emotional and psychic disorder” (“Neurasthenia”).

But psychosocial analyses, while alluring, do not tell the whole story. Gilman's arresting depiction of the ravaging effects of neurasthenia begs a more legitimizing analysis than historians, scholars, and feminists often provide. While these interpretations are seductive and likely hold some validity, what if there were heretofore unexplored *physical* causes? A fresh reading of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” suggests that in addition to the psychosocial costs of industrial capitalism, there was also a physiological toll.

Almost one hundred years after Gilman's first experience with “a constant dragging weariness miles below zero” (*Living* 91), lesbian feminist activist and author Joan Nestle was suddenly struck with “a fatigue that would swallow me up” (39). Like Gilman, Nestle soon found the simple demands of domesticity almost too much to bear:

I remember doing a very simple thing, shopping in a supermarket with my lover, and suddenly, the blanket of tiredness smothered me. I hung over the shopping cart, knowing that without its support I would have slid to the shiny floor. . . . [T]hat was the burden of this illness, to keep doing all the things that constitute normal life while I was drowning. For ten years, I struggled to keep my life afloat, doing all the things I had to, all the things I wanted to do in the world so I could feel that I was more than a chronically tired complainer. (39)

Only after some years was Nestle diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). In fact, the government did not officially recognize the illness until 1988—ten years after Nestle had found herself suddenly incapacitated—when the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) offered up a list of diagnostic criteria to help doctors and researchers distinguish the syndrome from other illnesses, and from depression and malingering. The hallmark of the syndrome, persistent and disabling fatigue, was accompanied by symptoms as diverse as cognitive difficulties, fever, sore throat, tender lymph nodes, sleep disturbance, and chronic pain.

As this “new” illness swept the nation, it caught the attention of the press and was pejoratively dubbed “yuppie flu.” Like neurasthenia, it was falsely believed to strike primarily upper-class white women.¹⁰ With no clinical biomarkers, doctors struggled to find an explanation for the illness. The vast majority dismissed their patients, telling them these disabling symptoms were all in their heads, and referring them to psychiatrists. Some theorized that the illness was triggered when ambitious women failed to make time for

adequate rest.¹¹ Others suggested that CFS sufferers were victims of the rapid pace of modern life.¹²

But in October 2009, an article authored by Vincent C. Lombardi with twelve colleagues, and published in the prestigious journal *Science*, announced a groundbreaking discovery. A retrovirus, called xenotropic murine leukemia virus-related virus (XMRV), was found in sixty-seven percent of 101 CFS patients tested, and just 3.7 percent of 218 healthy control subjects (Lombardi et al. 585). The same team, upon further research, found evidence of the retrovirus in almost ninety-eight percent of about 300 people with symptoms of CFS (Grady).

As terrible as it is to be diagnosed with a retrovirus—HIV is a retrovirus—it is worse to be told that the illness that has stolen one's life is just a new kind of hysteria. CFS sufferers around the world—communicating through Facebook and blogs, by phone and by email—rejoiced.

Follow-up studies have so far been unable to repeat the Lombardi team's XMRV results. Critics charge, however, that none of these subsequent studies was a true replication study. Until research conditions are properly replicated, the jury is out on XMRV and its connection to CFS.

Meanwhile, an earlier study suggested that the illness may indeed be a biopsychosocial response to industrialism. A large, multidisciplinary CDC study found genetic markers indicating reduced ability to adapt to stressors in people suffering from CFS.¹³ That is, certain people are genetically predisposed to contract the illness (or succumb to the retrovirus, if XMRV is indeed confirmed in follow-up studies to be the cause) once their allostatic load—the cumulative impact on the body from stressors such as physical and emotional trauma, chemical exposure, and the pressures of daily living—reaches its tipping point. It is possible that some people's bodies have not been able to adapt quickly enough to cope adequately with the wide range of assaults—from increased competition and the subsequent decay of community to the fast pace of modern living to the soaring exposures to pesticides and other chemicals—precipitated by the onslaught of industrialism.

Sometimes the byproducts of industrialism can sicken people in their own homes. While industrial pollutants like dioxin, mercury, and pesticides poison the environment and ultimately make their ways into people's bodies, some research has shown that indoor pollutants rival levels found at a Superfund site.¹⁴ Fresh paint, new carpet, air fresheners, scented candles, cleaning products, pesticides tracked in from yards and sidewalks, and more all contribute to the toxic loads borne by today's bodies. College professor Donna Regan¹⁵ suffered symptoms as wide-ranging as fatigue, numbness, persistent cough, incontinence, nausea, cognitive difficulties, shortness of

breath, and heart palpitations when an undiscovered propane leak poisoned her in her own home for over two years. She developed multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), a syndrome causing symptoms involving multiple organ systems when its victims are exposed to chemicals at levels most people find innocuous.¹⁶

Some of those who suffer from multiple chemical sensitivity refer to themselves as canaries in the coal mine, harbingers of this industrialized society's toxic legacy. Neurasthenia may have been an early forerunner of MCS and CFS,¹⁷ presenting an even earlier expression of the biological, psychological, and social costs of industrialism.¹⁸

In an era when factories were churning out smoke so thick that in some cities street lamps had to be kept lit even during the day, it should not come as a surprise that early industrialism took its toll on the body as well as the mind. For instance, the mechanization of agriculture and the food demands of an increasingly urban population precipitated large-scale cultivation of individual crops, creating ideal feeding grounds for insect pests. Farmers found a solution in arsenic, a cheap byproduct of the mining and dye industries. The toxic element became the reigning agricultural pesticide until after World War II, when it was dethroned by DDT.¹⁹ As cities grew and urban women began spending more time out of the home, personal appearance held greater importance. Some women turned to makeup to enhance appearance. While homemade concoctions were made with safe, organic ingredients, commercial preparations often contained dangerous toxins, including arsenic, mercury, and lead.²⁰ With inexplicable ailments on the rise, people sought remedies—which commonly contained mercury and arsenic.²¹ Arsenic, was, in fact, ubiquitous in Victorian domestic life, coloring products like candles, clothing, soap, paint, children's craft papers, food wrappers, and even sweets.²² And arsenic insinuated itself into Victorian domestic life on the walls of people's homes.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in 1890.²³ And while she later declared in her periodical, *The Forerunner*, that she wrote the story in reply to Dr. Mitchell's prescription (Gilman, "Why" 19–20), "The Yellow Wall-Paper" might also be seen as a commentary on one of the prevailing domestic insults of early industrialism: arsenical wallpapers.

Confined to her room by her paternalistic doctor husband, John, the neurasthenic protagonist is driven (arguably) to madness by the "smouldering unclean yellow" wallpaper decorating her room/prison (5). She and John have rented a mansion in the country so that she can recover from what John calls her "nervous depression" (12). Their sojourn might be seen as a retreat from urban industrialism. The house is "quite alone, standing well back from

the road, quite three miles from the village" (11). The narrator's description of the "lovely country . . . full of great elms and velvet meadows" is the pastoral antithesis of the industrial landscape they have left behind (18).

She laments that John does not believe she is sick, and clearly she does not think that his diagnosis is adequate or accurate (10). She suggests, in fact, that his attitude towards her illness ("he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" [9]) might be one reason she does not get well faster. But this subversive confession prompts her to return her attention to sanctioned domesticity: "So I will let it alone and talk about the house" (11).

She notes something "queer" about the house. "Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?" (9). She is not convinced that a legal dispute between heirs satisfactorily explains the sense she has that "there is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (11). John laughs at her, dismissing her intuitive sense that there is something wrong with the house—just as he dismisses her sense that there is something wrong with her body—and decides the best place for her is the nursery (12). The room, as she describes it, sounds more like a prison: "the windows are barred for little children and there are rings and things in the walls" (12). The wallpaper is stripped off in places, including "all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach" (12), hinting that perhaps she is not the room's first adult prisoner. She later states that these efforts at removal indicate that the house's previous owners "must have had perseverance as well as hatred" for the wallpaper (17). In her journal she writes, "I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those crawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin . . . a kind of 'debased Romanesque' with *delirium tremens*" (5, 9). She adds, "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (11).

In fact, an obscure story written thirty years earlier hints at what might lurk in the yellow wallpaper. "Our Best Bedroom," published anonymously in the popular English weekly, *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*,²⁴ suggests a fresh perspective on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and may in fact be seen as its eerie precursor. Set against a backdrop of dingy industrialism, the story features a young man who falls mysteriously ill after being assigned a bedroom papered in emerald green velvet flock. Fatigued and pale, he takes to his bed, delirious with fever. Soon his caregiver, sitting bedside, also develops headaches and fatigue. They send for an eminent London physician, who, observing the décor, suspects that the *wallpaper* is, in fact, to blame. He tests the wallpaper, finding it bears what he describes as "poison enough to be the death of generation after generation" (Anonymous 171).

“Our Best Bedroom” reflected the heated debate playing out in British medical journals and newspapers, first sparked by an 1857 letter by Dr. William Hinds, which was published in the *Medical Times and Gazette*. After redecorating his study, Hinds found himself plagued by a host of mysterious symptoms—including severe depression, nausea, abdominal pain, and faintness—beginning the very first time he occupied the room. Finally, Hinds speculated that his new wallpaper was making him sick. He subjected it to laboratory analysis and found the paper tainted with arsenic. He removed it, and his symptoms disappeared (Bartrip 899–900).

Newspapers like *The Times* reported a number of stories of children dying from arsenical wallpapers, and the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal* became vocal advocates for reform (Meharg 68). *Lancet* founder Thomas Wakley may himself have been poisoned by arsenical wallpapers after the journal’s offices were redecorated (Bartrip 902). But wallpaper manufacturers insisted the arsenical dyes used to decorate their papers were inert, and some scientists agreed. In the corrupt laissez-faire culture of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, the interests of business ran rampant over the concerns of the people, and legislators were loath to impose regulations despite widespread public outcry.

Industrialization made wallpapers affordable and popular. It also was responsible for the rapid proliferation of arsenical dyes. Arsenic, originally a waste product of the copper mining industry, was once left in piles that pocked the countryside (Meharg 131). But when copper values plummeted, industrialists found a compensatory profit-maker in a vivid new dye, Scheele’s green. Its key component was arsenic.²⁵ The dye grew popular because it was beautiful and it was cheap. Manufacturers used it to color everything from clothing to candles to candy wrappers.

When gas lighting replaced candles, homeowners could cover their white walls with colorful wallpapers without fear of darkening their rooms.²⁶ The process of machine printing lowered the cost of the papers, and when imported wood pulp replaced the traditional recycled rags, the price went down again (Meharg 66–67). Arsenic was one of the earliest industrial byproducts imported into the domestic realm.

Industrialism was slower to reach American shores, and, as a consequence, it took longer for wallpapers to become affordable and popular. By the time “The Yellow Wall-Paper” was written, however, the controversy over arsenical papers had reached the United States. A lengthy 1872 Massachusetts Board of Health document titled “On the Evil Effects of the Use of Arsenic in Certain Green Colors” devotes the bulk of its pages to concerns about arsenical wallpapers, noting that “the columns of the medical and

of the general press of the last ten years contain the histories of numerous instances" of illness attributable to the toxic wall coverings (37).

It was an issue of significant import. In his 1892 report to the Massachusetts committee on Public Health (of the Legislature), Dr. William Hills tested 1,018 wallpaper samples from twenty cities and towns all over the country and found that 38 percent contained arsenic "in appreciable quantities," and 3 percent contained very high levels of arsenic. The report indicates improvement over results from testing done ten years earlier, when very high levels of arsenic were found in 30 percent of wallpapers tested (Massachusetts Board of Health 4). Another study found arsenic present in the urine of 43 percent of a random sample of forty-eight people (Putnam, "Frequency" 422).

In a campaign to educate the public about the danger lurking on the walls of their homes, Dr. Robert Clark Kedzie, then president of the Michigan Medical Society, cut pieces from seventy-five wallpaper specimens known to be arsenical and collected them in an 1874 book called *Shadows from the Walls of Death*. He included stories of "authenticated cases of poisoning from many of these papers," according to an 1889 article in *Science* (Church), and sent the book to one hundred Michigan libraries. One patron was said to have been poisoned by examining the book.

In his book *Venomous Earth: How Arsenic Caused the World's Worst Mass Poisoning*, Andrew Meharg observes that nineteenth-century designer William Morris, in addition to being a renowned environmentalist and father of the Arts and Crafts movement, was the director, until 1875, of the largest arsenic-producing mine in the world. Profits from his shares supported his business, Morris and Company. Meharg quotes an 1885 letter written by Morris to a colleague, dismissive of complaints about arsenic in his wallpapers: "As to the arsenic scare a greater folly it is hardly possible to imagine. . . . My belief about it all is that the doctors find their patients ailing[,] don't know what's the matter with them, and in despair put it down to the wallpapers" (69). Meharg, a biogeochemist, tested the first eleven wallpapers that Morris designed between the years of 1862 and 1872. Of the eleven papers, nine contained arsenic. And not all of the papers testing positive were green. In fact, Meharg reports, "Arsenic came in other hues besides green. Red and yellow realgar and orpiment were also widely used in wallpapers. . . . Sixty out of 70 wallpapers tested for *The Lancet* in 1877 contained arsenic, including those colored blue, red, brown and pink" (69).²⁷

In 1891, Italian chemist Bartolomeo Gosio determined that certain fungi converted arsenic in wallpapers into a gas. He reported that the gas, which came to be known as "Gosio's Gas," could be distinguished by its garlicky

odor. English chemist Frederick Challenger identified the gas as trimethylarsine in 1932.²⁸ Damp rooms were the most likely to carry dangerous levels of the toxin. But what were the symptoms of trimethylarsine poisoning, and did they match the symptoms of neurasthenia?

A review of five nineteenth-century American research articles on arsenical wallpapers provides a representative symptom list.²⁹ Symptoms presenting with highest frequency included: fatigue/weakness, digestive problems, poor appetite/weight loss, nausea/vomiting, headache, poor sleep, and dry mouth and throat. Other symptoms listing more than once included vertigo, pain, faintness, diarrhea, depression, and paleness. George Beard's exhaustive description of neurasthenia names more than seventy symptoms, including ticklishness, "excessive gaping and yawning," and "involuntary emissions" (7–8). A more systematic list is found in F. G. Gosling's 1987 book, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870–1910*, which analyzes results from Gosling's review of 332 articles by 262 doctors, offering a broad picture of neurasthenia. He reports,

Symptoms fell into two not-altogether-separable classifications, "physical" and "mental." Excessive fatigue from slight exertion was the primary sign of neurasthenia and characterized the illness. . . . Other physical symptoms cited were gastric disturbances and headache; . . . [t]he most prominent mental symptoms were insomnia, lack of concentration, depression, fears, and irritability. (79–80)

The symptoms are, in fact, strikingly similar.

Indirect allusions to arsenical wallpapers would have capitalized on widespread fears of the time, while readers a century divorced from those concerns would miss this important element of the story.³⁰ In the words of Gilman's protagonist, "It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, that perhaps it is the paper!" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 13).

Heather Kirk Thomas's 2000 essay, "[A] kind of 'debased Romanesque' with *delirium tremens*: Late-Victorian Wall Coverings and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,'" appears to lend support to this hypothesis. Thomas suggests that "Gilman's artistically precise delineation of the wallpaper seems a clever strategy conceived to ensure that her contemporary reader would imaginatively associate [William] Morris's popular arabesque designs with the attic bedroom's sinuous pattern, bilious color, and nightmarish aquarium effect" (194). But Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, in her 2004 book, *Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, refutes Thomas's assertion, noting that Gil-

man was in fact a great admirer of Morris. She argues, convincingly, that Thomas's representation "surely misapplies to Morris the paper's violation of all principles of design—for it is unreasonable to fault Morris'[s] papers on this score" (235).

While Thomas alludes to arsenical dyes, she does not directly link them to William Morris wallpapers or Gilman's story. But Sutton-Ramspeck does connect "The Yellow Wall-Paper" to the arsenic scare. She indicates that arsenical wallpapers were commonly discussed in advice books, including Dr. Benjamin Ward's *Diseases of Modern Life*, which Gilman's own journal entries indicate she read in 1883 (Sutton-Ramspeck 124). Sutton-Ramspeck also notes that many of the symptoms identified in Dr. Malcolm Morris's 1883 case studies of poisonings from arsenical wallpapers in fact match symptoms described by Gilman's narrator. These include "intolerance of light, 'malaise,' great depression, restlessness, wakefulness, and loss of sleep—all consistent with the narrator's 'nervousness,' obvious depression, and habit of creeping around the room at night" (124).

A number of clues found within the text may in fact be subtle references to the arsenical wallpapers that had gained such notoriety in the Victorian press. The paper commits "every artistic sin" (Gilman, "Yellow" 13), including, perhaps, toxicity. It causes confusion and irritation and leads to self-destruction ("suicide") (13). It is described as "unclean," "sickly" (13), "horrid" (15), and "foul" (28), with "a vicious influence" (16).

After her first entry, the narrator does not write another for a full two weeks, not having "felt like" doing so, due to "lack of strength" and depression (13–14), perhaps caused by arsenic poisoning. And Jennie, John's sister, complains that the paper rubs off in "yellow smooches" on their clothes, just as Dr. Morris explained that the trioxide of arsenic in Scheele's green, "when dry[,] cracks and peels off with the slightest friction." Sutton-Ramspeck speculates that it is likely that "as the narrator begins to tear off the paper, even more dust is released, accelerating the arsenic's effects" (125).

Gilman's narrator makes a number of references to fungus. This is an interesting intimation, since the Italian chemist Bartolomeo Gosio did not determine the connection between fungi and arsenic until 1891, a year after "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was written (but a year before it was published). However, that the poisonings seemed most often to happen in damp climates and damp rooms was noted and reported. For instance, in 1883 Dr. Morris warned that arsenical wallpapers in the process of decomposing "become gaseous . . . as evidenced by their odour and yellowish colour." Erroneously referring to the gas as "arseniuretted hydrogen" (now known as arsine), he said that the "vapours" were "carried and diffused by the motion of the air

in the moist warm days of summer, and stealthily invade the skin and lungs in quantities that render them very potent for evil” (369).

The narrator writes of the wallpaper that “the outside pattern is a florid arabesque reminding one of a fungus.” She says, “imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions” (25). Later, she refers to images in the paper as “waddling fungus growths” (34). And finally, she writes, “There are always new shoots on the fungus” (25). This allusion comes just before she comments on a smell that might as well be a reference to the garlicky smell of trimethylarsine: “But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here,” she says, adding, after some thought, that the odor is “like the color of the paper! A yellow smell” (28–29).

When John refuses to repaper the room, declaring that next she would blame “the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then the gate at the head of the stairs” for her troubles (14), it is perhaps a reference to the arguments of the pro-business critics who wielded perspectives similar to William Morris’s. John might not have been aware that his dismissive sarcasm alluded to symbols of his wife’s imprisonment within the confines of gendered domesticity, but Gilman drove her point home with the gate and the bedstead and the barred windows. Later, Gilman’s narrator hints that indeed she does object to those symbols of domestic confinement when she adds that “he is right enough about the beds and windows and things” (15). And yet she doesn’t mind that the floor is “scratched and gouged and splintered” and the plaster “is dug out here and there.” She asserts again that it is just the paper that concerns her (17).

She expresses gratitude that her baby does not have to occupy the room with its “horrid wallpaper,” and adds, “What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn’t have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds. . . . I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see” (22). A baby would be much more vulnerable to the effects of trimethylarsine.

Later, in the moonlight, the narrator perceives bars in the pattern of the wallpaper (26). Women, trapped within the domestic confines of home, were much more vulnerable to poisoning by trimethylarsine than their husbands, who left the house every day for work. What is lurking in the paper, “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about” (18), might be arsenic, and, like the figure, it did indeed find its way out of the wallpapers and into the domestic realm of people’s houses, including this one.

The longer the narrator is confined to the room, the worse she gets. "Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much," she writes. "It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight" (21). Some intuitive part of her appears to know that she might improve if she could just get out of the room for an extended period of time. She initiates "a real earnest talk" with John, asking his permission to leave the house and visit her cousin. But he declines her request. Alluding again to what he sees as the emotional origins of her illness, he says she must use her "will and self-control and not let any silly fancies" run away with her (22).

In her memoir, Gilman proudly writes of one instance in which "The Yellow Wall-Paper" had the desired effect. A woman "in similar trouble" as Gilman's protagonist, even to the point of having hallucinations about her wallpaper, was confined to her room by her family and treated with the Rest Cure. Upon reading the story, says Gilman, they were "so impressed by the clear implication of what ought to have been done, that they changed her wallpaper and the treatment of the case—and she recovered!" (*Living* 121). Numerous case studies report similar spontaneous recovery upon removal of the offending paper; others report long-term effects despite significant improvements.³¹ But how many people were left sick without knowing the source? Gilman makes no further comment about the implications of the change of wallpaper, leaving her contemporary readers to imagine that perhaps the wallpaper was simply ugly enough to drive a bedridden woman to distraction.

Gilman biographer Ann J. Lane notes that "between the time Charlotte was born and the end of the century, the physical and corporate organization of industrial capitalism was essentially created" (9). Gilman's oeuvre makes few, if any, overt criticisms of industrial capitalism. Instead, she held fast to her mission to build cooperative communities and free women from domestic servitude and economic dependence on men, and she found ways to fuse her doctrines with Victorian paradigms.

Nonetheless, the burgeoning industrial capitalism could not but have had a notable psychological impact on Gilman and her contemporaries. Embedded in the narrator's descriptions of the wallpaper are a number of subtle references to mass production. She sees, in the paper, "always the same shape, only very numerous" (22) and "an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions" (25). And she describes "a streak that runs round the room. . . . Round and round and round—round and round and round," circular and repetitive, like the process of mechanization. In the end, she herself transforms into a cog in the wheel of mechanized industrialism, circling the room on her hands and knees: "But here I can

creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way” (35).

But industrial capitalism also bore a physiological impact on its nineteenth-century populace. While no evidence suggests that arsenic was the sole cause of neurasthenia, arsenic—and other physiological assaults—may have contributed to the rise of the illness, just as what many think of as innocuous chemicals appear to be contributing to health problems today. And while Gilman did not believe herself to have been poisoned by arsenical wallpapers,³² doubtless she, like other Victorians, was exposed to industrial toxins from a wide range of sources.

What’s horrifying about “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is in part that we don’t quite *know* what’s horrifying. The story’s subtle allusions to the arsenic scare heighten the sense of the dangers of gendered domesticity. In this way, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is also a commentary on the domestic costs of early industrialism. Complex, multi-system illnesses like neurasthenia, CFS, and MCS implicate biology, psychology, and society as mutually interactive contributors to poor health, challenging traditional Cartesian notions of the mind-body divide. In order for neurasthenia and its contemporary corollaries to be thoroughly understood, they must be viewed through a biopsychosocial lens. Restored to its industrial context, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” illuminates the intersections among the biological, the psychological, and the social forces that shaped Gilman’s world and continue to influence our own.

NOTES

1. I am deeply indebted to Jennifer S. Tuttle, who played an indispensable role in the conception and development of this essay. She handed me the article that led me into research about arsenical wallpapers, a small clipping from the 22 June 2003 *Boston Globe*, “Death by Wallpaper,” by Joshua Glenn, page D3. Later, her astute observations critically aided my close reading of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.”

2. “Frangipani” is defined by *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., as “a perfume derived from or imitating the odor of the flower of a frangipani,” a tropical ornamental shrub (462).

3. Beard was not in fact the first to use the term “neurasthenia.” It was cited as early as 1808, but Beard is credited with popularizing its usage. See Gosling 26.

4. In addition, Beard associated the body with capitalism by describing “nerve-force” in financial terms: “The man [*sic*] with a small income [nerve-force] is really rich, as long as there is no overdraft on the account.” However, if such a person works too hard or faces an influx of stressors, he might find himself in “nervous bankruptcy, from which he finds it as hard to rise as from financial bankruptcy” (10). See also Barbara E.

Will, "Nervous Systems, 1880–1915," *American Bodies: Cultural Histories of the Physique*, ed. Tim Armstrong (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 86–100.

5. In "The Pieces of the Puzzle: The Enigmatic Gilman," a paper delivered at the Fourth International Conference on Charlotte Perkins Gilman (2006), Denise D. Knight noted that Gilman is now believed to be the author of *Art Gems for the Home and Fireside*, a book previously attributed to her good friend, Grace Ellery Channing Stetson. Since the book, published in 1888, would have been written during Gilman's reported convalescence, Knight questions whether Gilman's account of her illness—written over forty years later—might have been exaggerated to support her self-mythologizing as the survivor toiling through adversity. But *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* author Laura Hillenbrand, who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome, describes in "A Sudden Illness—How My Life Changed" (*New Yorker*, 7 July 2003: 56–65) how a determined writer finds ways to overcome disability and adversity to carry a redemptive project to completion. See also Floyd Skloot's *In the Shadow of Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) and Dorothy Wall's *Encounters with the Invisible: Unseen Illness, Controversy, and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2005) for further evidence of the Herculean measures taken by ill writers determined to write.

6. See, for instance, Ellen L. Bassuk, "The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?", *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986): 139–51; Ehrenreich and English; Lutz; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Penguin, 1985) 121–44; Barbara Sicherman, "The Uses of a Diagnosis: Doctors, Patients, and Neurasthenia," *Sickness and Health in America: Readings in the History of Medicine and Public Health*, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt and Ronald L. Numbers (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978): 25–38; Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (New York: Bantam, 1980); and Wood.

7. Gosling refers to neurasthenia as "no more than a foolish fad" (25). Ehrenreich and English refer to neurasthenia as a "morbid cult of hypochondria" (124). See also Wood.

8. See Lutz 6. "Brain-workers," as distinct from "muscle-workers," or laborers, referred to the middle and upper classes. See also Beard 96.

9. See, for example, Ehrenreich and English. Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg makes little to no distinction between hysteria and neurasthenia in "The Hysterical Woman." Describing the female hysteric as "both product and indictment of her culture," Smith-Rosenberg extrapolates the many ways that the sick role "purchased her escape" from the self-abnegation of her assigned gender role. She also notes the cost: "pain, disability, and an intensification of woman's traditional passivity and dependence." Doctors could be condescending or even abusive. "Not a few women . . . showed a remarkable willingness to submit to long-term, painful therapy—to electric-shock treatment, to blistering, to multiple operations, even to amputations" (201).

10. See Dr. William C. Reeves's comment that CFS was long dismissed as the complaint of "a bunch of hysterical, upper-class white women," in Maugh. Dedra Buchwald et al. found that when controlled for help-seeking behavior, African Americans were

overrepresented and women were represented in only slightly higher numbers than men. See "Chronic Fatigue and the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: Prevalence in a Pacific Northwest Health Care System," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 123.2 (15 July 1995): 81–88. A CDC study in San Francisco indicated that "CFS-like illness" was most prevalent among women, African Americans, and people whose household incomes were under \$40,000 (Steele 83S). As for neurasthenia, Gosling dispels the myth of the upper-class, female neurasthenic. Analyzing 332 articles on neurasthenia, Gosling found that "male and female patients were reported equally in the medical journal literature" (34), and while neurasthenia presented itself all along the class spectrum, attributed causes varied depending on the patient's class status (54–55). Simon Wessely also provides evidence that neurasthenia impacted those from lower socioeconomic classes (48).

11. See, for instance, Griffin 31. Physician theories are also reported in my "Doctors' Perceptions."

12. For instance, one doctor cited in my "Doctors' Perceptions" theorized:

I think why chronic fatigue is becoming more common is that it's the result of our culture not allowing us to rest. During the day, to take a nap or to take a long lunch . . . it's considered, we're considered lazy, or not go-getters, or losers in some way, if we don't pound pavement, or . . . work . . . more than forty hours a week or have an extra job on the weekends. . . . [I]t's a cultural norm. So I think this is just a result of our culture overworking, and not diagnosing *fatigue* before it becomes chronic. (Lunden 12)

13. See Susan D. Vernon and William C. Reeves's "The Challenge of Integrating Disparate High-Content Data: Epidemiological, Clinical and Laboratory Data Collected During an In-Hospital Study of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome," *Pharmacogenomics* 7.3 (2006): 345–54. An easy-to-read overview can be found in Maugh.

14. See Wayne R. Ott and John W. Roberts's "Everyday Exposure to Toxic Pollutants," *Scientific American*, Feb. 1998: 86–91.

15. Regan is not her real surname. Donna's story was culled from Alison Johnson, ed., *Casualties of Progress: Personal Histories from the Chemically Sensitive* (Brunswick, ME: MCS Information Exchange, 2000): 126–30.

16. While MCS was officially recognized by the Social Security Administration in 1988, official criteria for diagnosis have not yet been agreed upon. See "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity: A 1999 Consensus," *Archives of Environmental Health* 54.3 (1999): 147–49, for proposed criteria for a clinical diagnosis of MCS.

17. CFS and MCS share some overlap in symptomology. As many as thirty-nine percent of patients suffer from both simultaneously, according to Nancy Fiedler et al., in "A Controlled Comparison of Multiple Chemical Sensitivities and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 58 (1996): 45.

18. See Wessely 35–53; Susan E. Abbey and Paul E. Garfinkel, "Neurasthenia and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: The Role of Culture in the Making of a Diagnosis," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148.12 (Dec. 1991): 1638–757; and Edward Shorter, "Chronic Fatigue in Historical Perspective," *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome*. Ciba Foundation Symposium 173 (Chichester: Wiley, 1993): 6–22 for detailed connections between CFS and neurasthenia.

19. See Whorton 3–24 for a thorough history of arsenical pesticides.

20. See Kathy Peiss's *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998) for specifics about the toxic contents of makeup.

21. See Meharg 93–108 and Gosling 118–20.

22. See Whorton 39–40; Bartrip; and Meharg 84–86.

23. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was published in January 1892.

24. "Our Best Bedroom" was most likely written by co-publisher Robert Chambers, who wrote many of the articles in *Chambers's Journal* and was the anonymous author of the potentially scandalous evolutionist treatise, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844).

25. To view an example of Scheele's green, see the cover of Meharg's book, which shows William Morris's 1868–1870 wallpaper, "Indian."

26. Environmental health engineer and toxicologist Albert Donnay has made some fascinating links between neurasthenia and carbon monoxide poisoning from gaslights. See "Historic Grand Rounds: To Diagnose His Disease, 'Poe' Visits NIH," *NIH Record*, 2 Jan. 2002. Web. 22 Dec. 2009; and Albert Donnay, "A True Tale of a Truly Haunted House," Ghostvillage.com, 31 Oct. 2004 (http://www.ghostvillage.com/resources/2004/resources_10312004.shtml) (accessed 7 July 2010). He also ties multiple chemical sensitivity to carbon monoxide poisoning in "What You Need to Know About Carbon Monoxide and Multi-Sensory Sensitivity," *MCS Referral & Resources*, MCS Referral & Resources, Inc., 23 Oct. 2006. Web. 22 Dec. 2009.

27. Some of the Morris papers identified by Meharg as arsenical can be viewed in Pamela Todd, *William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Home* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2005). For instance, "Daisy," 1862 (22) contains no green at all, only shades of yellow, red, and gray. Others include "Trellis," 1862 (38), "Fruit" (also known as "Pomegranate") 1866 (59), and "Larkspur," 1875 (69).

28. In "The Toxicity of Trimethylarsine: An Urban Myth," *Journal of Environmental Monitoring* 7.1 (Dec. 2004): 11–15, chemist William R. Cullen and biologist Ronald Bentley cite studies indicating that trimethylarsine has been shown to have little toxicity. They simultaneously note that much of the research on trimethylarsine toxicity appears to have been done by industrial groups. They go on to discuss sick building syndrome, suggesting that perhaps it was mold itself that caused symptoms of ill health.

29. See Massachusetts Board of Health 18–57; Putnam, "Chronic" and "Frequency"; Sanger; and Shattuck.

30. In *The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Victorian Nightmare*, scholar Jim Bennett claims to have a note in Gilman's own handwriting proposing to author an article relating to arsenical wallpapers for a London magazine. (The piece was never written.) He also indicates at least one instance of an advertisement referring to arsenical wallpapers in Gilman's periodical, *The Forerunner*. However, a thorough scan of every issue turned up no such advertisement. Sadly, due to a movie deal gag order, Bennett has withdrawn his self-published book from availability. The details reported here came from personal communication with Bennett.

31. See Massachusetts Board of Health, 18–57; Putnam, "Chronic" and "Frequency"; Sanger; and Shattuck.

32. Jim Bennett indicated in personal communication that Gilman remarked upon this in her query to the London magazine.

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The Yellow Newspaper

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman and
Sensational Journalism**

SARI EDELSTEIN

In November 1909, Charlotte Perkins Gilman began publishing *The Forerunner*, the monthly periodical that she wrote and edited for the next seven years. Its mission, as she describes it, is to “stimulate thought; to arouse hope, courage and impatience”; and to “express ideas which need a special medium” (“As to Purpose”). She opens the first issue of *The Forerunner* with a poem in which she explicitly introduces her project as a response to an increasingly sensational press:

“THEN THIS”

The news-stands bloom with magazines,
 They flame, they blaze indeed;
 So bright the cover-colors glow,
 So clear the startling stories show,
 So vivid their pictorial scenes,
 That he who runs may read.
 Then This: It strives in prose and verse,
 Thought, fancy, fact, and fun,
 To tell the things we ought to know,
 To point the way we ought to go,

* A version of this essay originally appeared in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 24.1 (2007): 72-92, published by the University of Nebraska Press. It is reproduced here by permission.

So audibly to bless and curse,
That he who reads may run. (1–12)

In the first verse, Gilman describes the popular press almost exclusively in terms of its visual distinctiveness: the "news-stands bloom" and the "cover-colors glow." In the second verse, she distinguishes *The Forerunner* from these eye-catching magazines by emphasizing its artistic and literary substance, not its "startling stories." She hopes her periodical will incite readers to move forward in the "way we ought to go."

With the expression of these ambitions, Gilman defines her work against "yellow journalism," the term coined by a newspaper editor in 1897 to describe media practices that exploit, distort, or exaggerate the news.¹ With its "vivid pictorial scenes" and salacious stories, yellow journalism transformed the appearance of the nineteenth-century newspaper and intensified reporting practices that emerged with the penny presses of the 1830s. As a journalist and fiction writer, Gilman sought to expose an ideology of patriarchy and to create a female reading community that stood in staunch opposition to what she considered the menacing effects of the yellow press. From the first lines of her publication, it is clear that Gilman's founding of *The Forerunner* was an attempt to cultivate intellectual journalism at a moment when sensational newspapers and tabloids dominated the print marketplace.

Gilman's disdain for the contemporary newspaper stemmed from her concern with its corruption of print culture as well as from a more personal complaint against those who participated in and promoted the practice of sensational journalism. Several scholars have observed that Gilman took offense at the vicious reporting strategies of sensational newspaper writers. Lawrence Oliver and Gary Scharnhorst have examined Gilman's contempt for Ambrose Bierce, whose columns in the *San Francisco Examiner* in the early 1890s frequently included personal attacks on women journalists. According to Oliver and Scharnhorst, "Bierce scorned Gilman's effort to earn a reputation if not a living by her pen" (33). Similarly, Denise D. Knight has provided insight into Gilman's notoriously contentious relationship with newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, whose reporters repeatedly exploited her as an object of scandal in the gossip columns of his newspapers. As Knight explains, Gilman's rigorous commitment to "ethical journalism" arose partly out of the treatment she received from the Hearst newspaper empire (46). On a broader level, Shelley Fisher Fishkin has written about Gilman's "lambast[ing] the press as a whole for managing to consistently miss or belittle the really important news of the day" (234). These scholars, among others, have illustrated the extent to which Gilman was critical of sensational

journalism. An advocate for the reformation of the press, Gilman sought to be taken seriously as a female journalist and to keep her private life out of the spectacle of sensationalism.

Given her well-documented personal and professional conflicts with contemporary newspaper culture, it is productive to read Gilman's fiction in terms of her concerns about the print marketplace. I will argue that Gilman's now canonical short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," published in 1892, draws much of its symbolic strength from the imagery and iconography of yellow journalism. Gilman's descriptions of the wallpaper throughout the text distinctly echo those used by the general public to describe the turn-of-the-century tabloid. Like the tabloid, it is yellow and sprawling, and the wallpaper is guilty of "committing every artistic sin" (13). As in her *Forerunner* poem, Gilman's emphasis on visual aesthetics in the story reflects the cultural preoccupation with the striking appearance of the sensational newspaper as well as its debasement of literary and artistic standards. Moreover, the narrator's vexed relationship to the wallpaper resembles Gilman's own relationship to the journalistic community.

Recent scholarship on Gilman has tended to deal primarily with her feminist and racial politics, both of which are crucial and explicit elements of her work. My reading of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" refocuses these discussions by investigating Gilman's simultaneous participation in and opposition to the popular print media industry. In reading the story in its cultural and biographical contexts, I am not seeking to reproduce what Susan Lanser has called the narrator's "relentless pursuit of a single meaning on the wall" (420). Rather, it is my intention to locate the story's politics more precisely within the media landscape of the late nineteenth century. By examining the reliance of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" on the cultural vocabulary of the newspaper world, I hope to establish the extent to which the literary marketplace influenced Gilman's work and to reveal more fully the joint pressures of genre and gender upon late-nineteenth-century writers.

Since its republication by the Feminist Press in 1973, Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has achieved the status of a recovered classic. As such, the central narrative of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is by now familiar: An upper-class white woman is taken by her husband, a doctor, to a country estate to recover from what is presumably postpartum depression. Instructed to remain in bed, the woman becomes fixated with the yellow paper on the wall of the room to which she is confined and gradually envisions movement, and eventually a woman, behind its mesmerizing patterns. Critics have read the story as a critique of the cult of true womanhood, as an indictment of the medical establishment, and as a manifestation of Gilman's now well-docu-

mented nativism.² In this essay, I read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as revelatory of Gilman's anxiety about the cultural power of yellow journalism, which threatened her position as an author and a feminist and compromised her privacy and her reputation.

Though the term "yellow journalism" was not coined until at least 1897, sensational journalism emerged as a major trend in the 1880s with Joseph Pulitzer's purchase of *The New York World*, and members of the intellectual and literary communities criticized this new journalism as early as 1881.³ As Joseph Campbell writes, "To be sure, yellow journalism did not simply burst upon the media landscape of the United States in the 1890s, unique and fully formed. It was malleable and it borrowed from past practice. . . . Yellow journalism was, as contemporaneous observers noted, born before it was baptized" (9). In other words, the hallmarks of yellow journalism—the emphasis on scandal, the massive headlines, the excessive illustration—were operative in the print media before the inception of the term. Moreover, throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the color yellow was associated with the "publication of cheap sensational literature, particularly in yellow-covered pamphlets" (Reynolds 183).⁴ Thus, even though the term "yellow journalism" was most likely not part of the vernacular in the early 1890s when Gilman was writing the story, yellowness did connote tabloid-style writing and cheap paper, and the newspaper was already changing the cultural landscape in dramatic ways. The rise of yellow journalism was in part a function of technological innovation, as changes in print technology in the 1870s and 1880s allowed for enormous increases in production and circulation. Most significantly, wood-pulp stock, which yellowed with age, replaced the more expensive fiber crops as the principal source for newsprint, and improvements in typesetting diminished costs and turned the newspaper into a cheap commodity available for the first time to a widespread readership. As the newspaper developed as a mass medium, it also emerged as a serious commercial enterprise and attracted entrepreneurs who began to consider it a potentially lucrative pursuit. Chief among the businessmen who exploited the profitability of the press were Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, whose dueling papers, the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*, epitomized the tendency toward sensationalism. In their bid to win readers, editors for these papers, and others throughout the nation, incorporated illustrations, cartoons, and human-interest stories. By the end of the 1880s, as Ted C. Smythe writes, "the Pulitzer news style had been set. . . . [T]he [*New York*] *World's* make up would change over time, but the emphasis on pathos, sex, and crime dominated the newspaper, front page and inside" (13). Sensationalism became characteristic of the substance and style of many

daily newspapers, and readers purchased them in direct proportion to their inflated and exaggerated headlines and pictures.

The popularity of the commercial daily newspaper posed a significant threat to serious fiction. While the majority of newspapers published short fiction, and thus encouraged the expansion and professionalization of fiction writing, editors and syndicate managers also severely hampered artistic freedom. As the press found success through its invasive and penetrating style, so the editors commissioned and sought out fiction that likewise satisfied a public desire for sensational, fast-paced stories. Thus, while many late-nineteenth-century authors relied upon newspapers to bring their work into print and to gain public recognition, the merging of literary and financial concerns “left little room for genuine personal artistic autonomy,” let alone for political messages such as Gilman’s (Johanningsmeier 28). While some novelists, such as William Dean Howells, Ambrose Bierce, and Stephen Crane, located themselves within the newspaper establishment, others were apprehensive and even resentful about its increasing influence over the reading public. Henry James, for example, was hostile to the newspaper, which he felt threatened his livelihood and reputation. His 1886 novel, *The Bostonians*, refers to the “penetralia of the daily press,” characterizing the press as a domineering, invasive masculine organ (82).

Gilman would have agreed. Like James and many of her contemporaries, she was disgusted with the rise of the intrusive, money-driven newspaper culture. However, Gilman, unlike James, was also invested in the mass media, both to support herself financially and to cultivate a female reading community, and consequently, she could not wholly disregard the newspapers or periodicals even as she found fault with the transformation of print culture. As a cultural critic, Gilman was candid about her commitment to artistic and intellectual standards, and the narrator in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” seems to be a spokesperson for these views. The narrator’s initial response to the wallpaper is a judgment about its artistic shortcomings: “I never saw worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (13). As the first opinion she provides about the wallpaper, this statement reveals the narrator’s attachment to conservative artistic principles. Her very use of the word “paper,” a shorthand term for newspaper even in Gilman’s day, also invokes the connection between the wallpaper and the popular press. Later in the story, she makes a similar assessment of the wallpaper’s aesthetics, noting, “I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of” (20). Thus, the wallpaper is aesthetically disorganized and confusing, and its frenzied design represents a break from the straight-

forward, instructive patterns with which the narrator is familiar.

The narrator's critique of the wallpaper distinctly resembles the complaints about the state of the press made by contemporary cultural critics, who often pointed to the newspaper's appearance as particularly objectionable. In 1886, an article in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* reads: "Pick up any single one of our large dailies, and, glancing over its columns, see if you can escape this contamination. . . . [W]herever your eyes fall you will find the narrative of some loathsome deed, spiced, and peppered with the most abject sensationalism" (Pallen 470). And the *Overland Monthly* included an equally critical account: "The spicy details of a divorce, or the sickening particulars of a murder, are spread out over a column, illustrated by pictures whose artistic deficiencies constitute them an abuse of the liberty of the press" (Smith 474). That these writers were especially dismayed by the "artistic deficiencies" of the newspaper links them with Gilman's narrator, who finds the same fault in the wallpaper. Such condemnations of the newspaper were rampant throughout the 1880s, even before the coinage of "yellow journalism." In fact, in 1900, when Delos Wilcox conducted an extensive study of the American newspaper, he identified yellow journalism by the same features that critics had deplored in the newspaper since the 1880s: its disregard for artistic quality and its unique visual markers. Wilcox notes,

One of the characteristic methods of yellow journalism is to prostitute the headlines to an unworthy function, either by making them unduly prominent and thus forcing attention or by making them exaggerate or misrepresent the contents of dispatches. . . . The reader of the daily papers is often at a loss to give any connected account of the course of important events simply because he has had a rapid series of vague and conflicting impressions from hastily looking over the headings of the daily dispatches. (88)

The narrator's description of the wallpaper resembles Wilcox's descriptions of the yellow newspaper to a striking extent. Like Wilcox, she emphasizes the effects of the visual presentation upon the viewer: "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (13). Like Wilcox, Gilman's narrator stresses the visual disorientation of the wallpaper. The "eye" is literally confused by trying to follow the simultaneously pronounced and uncertain curves of the pattern. Also like Wilcox, the narrator focuses on the irregular and contradictory quality of her paper. Gilman's narrator sees

“unheard of contradictions” in the wallpaper, just as Wilcox notes that the yellow journals employ huge headlines that lead to “vague and conflicting impressions.” These “contradictions” also recall the yellow newspaper’s reputation for slanderous, unsubstantiated stories, just as the “outrageous angles” in the wallpaper call to mind the embellished tales of murder and intrigue that abounded in the yellow press. Moreover, Gilman’s narrator notes, “The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction” (20). Its horizontal layout suggests the wallpaper’s likeness to print, but unlike standard print documents, the wallpaper’s order is chaotic and hard to follow, much like the layout of a sensational newspaper.

When read against contemporaneous accounts of the effects of the popular press upon readers, the narrator’s supposed insanity looks much like an exaggeration of the typical response to yellow journalism. After all, her disorientation, her frenzy, and her obsession are linked to her preoccupation with a problematic, disjointed paper, and many cultural commentators linked sensational newspapers to nervous breakdowns and intellectual stagnation.⁵ In 1886, Augustus Levey of the *North American Review* argued that the contemporary sensational newspaper induced a “mild form of mania which needs regulation and control as much as other petty vices of human nature” (308). Wilcox called yellow journalism “pathological, a social vice the consequences of which are very grave” (76).⁶ And in a much more recent description of the late-nineteenth-century newspaper, Alan Trachtenberg writes, “The big-city press, then, crystallized the cultural predicament [Frederick] Olmsted discovered in the commercial street: the condition of isolation and nervous calculation” (125). Indeed, nervousness is the principal symptom for which the narrator in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is undergoing the rest cure. In this light, the story is a kind of cautionary tale for the culture; it warns readers to avoid the “pointless patterns” of the newspaper in order to remain sane and rational thinkers.

Significantly, Gilman’s use of wallpaper as a figure for newspaper has historical antecedents. During the Civil War, a paper shortage necessitated the printing of Confederate newspapers on wallpaper.⁷ For instance, during the summer of 1863, numerous editions of the *Vicksburg Daily Citizen* were printed on wallpaper. Conversely, newspapers have also been used as wallpaper, to provide insulation and even decoration, since at least the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. Given the existing cultural linkages of the wallpaper and the newspaper, Gilman’s use of the wallpaper as a symbol for the press would have been even more recognizable for her original readership.

While my understanding of the wallpaper as visually and figuratively tied to the sensational newspaper is a departure from the previous readings of this central symbol, it also contributes to and engages with the work scholars have done to historicize the story. Susan S. Lanser and subsequent scholars have asserted that the wallpaper is reflective of Gilman's nativism. Certainly the "smouldering unclean yellow" of the wallpaper echoes the anti-Chinese racism of the late nineteenth century, and yet the fact that the paper is "strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" also calls to mind a newspaper left too long in the sun. The connection between these historical resonances lies in the newspaper's affiliation with and reliance on immigrants. After all, the very term "yellow journalism" was based upon a racist caricature that circulated as a newspaper cartoon. Drawn by Richard Outcault, the "Yellow Kid" was an Irish-American street urchin who wore an oversized yellow shirt. The newspaper, in its dissemination of this particular image as well as numerous others like it, was not only complicit with, but instrumental in creating, a racial anxiety that dominated the 1880s and 90s. And Gilman, who has been called a "eugenic feminist," would have associated the popular press with the poor, the "grotesque," and the "yellow" and with the corruption of the nation.⁸

But beyond jeopardizing Gilman's nativist fantasy of America, the sensational newspaper also imperiled her position as a professional writer. Changes in the substance and style of newspapers heavily influenced magazines and periodicals, which were major venues for new fiction and editorials. Sensational newspapers stimulated readers' interest in the dark side of human experience, and magazines, with the exception of a handful of high-brow periodicals, catered to the public demand for insubstantial, and often lurid, human-interest stories. Moreover, magazines, like newspapers, became increasingly dependent on advertisers, and editors often chose content that would satisfy their business interests rather than their intellectual or artistic aims. To ensure publication, some writers went so far as to endorse specific consumer goods in their fiction. Writers like Gilman, whose stories did not appeal to advertisers or to a popular reading audience, were forced either to compromise their writing or risk not being published. Of her brief attempt to support herself as a writer for a newspaper syndicate, Gilman writes, "[T]hough I tried my best to reach and hold the popular taste, I couldn't do it, so after a year that effort came to an end" (*Living* 310).

Given that Gilman occupied such a precarious position within the literary and journalistic spheres, it is useful to consider her representation of the story's narrator as a writer. We learn early on in the story that the text we are reading is her journal, a literary endeavor of some sort. She makes this clear

on the first page, in which she confides in a parenthetical note, “I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (19). Here, the narrator makes the important distinction that the paper upon which she writes is “dead paper.” While “dead paper” contrasts most clearly with “living soul,” one might also read the characterization of paper as “dead” in another way: if some paper is “dead,” then perhaps other paper is implicitly “alive.” In the context of Gilman’s relationship to journalists and her difficulty in publishing her work, one might deduce that the paper that is alive is the newspaper, the paper that rules Gilman’s life, sets fire to her reputation, and pushes her out of print. By contrast, Gilman’s feminist work, like her narrator’s journal, is “dead,” lacking both audience and venue. As Conrad Shumaker notes, “[The narrator’s] occasional use of ‘you,’ her questions[,] . . . and her confidential tone all suggest that she is attempting to reach or create the listener she cannot otherwise find” (593). The narrator’s acknowledgment so early on in the story that her paper is “dead” foregrounds Gilman’s own concern with reception, with audience, and with the power of her language.

In the story, the narrator has a room of her own, but she is not permitted to write in it; in fact, her room—dominated by both the yellow paper and the watchful patriarchy—becomes the space that prohibits, rather than enables, literary production. As she confides, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (10). One way to read the “heavy opposition” to which the narrator refers is in the context of the sensational news empire, which was an oppositional force that Gilman found especially frustrating in the years surrounding the dissolution of her first marriage. Following her separation from her husband Charles Walter Stetson in 1887, Gilman found herself the subject of gossip columns and sensational news stories.⁹ The press’s interest in exposing the details of Gilman’s divorce outraged her, and she vehemently sought to remove herself from the media limelight. In her autobiography, Gilman recounts an episode in which a reporter from Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner* attempts to interview her for details of her divorce. As she explains, “I saw him, told him the simple facts, that there was no ‘story.’ . . . The result was a full page in the *Examiner*, with interviews from various members of the P.C.W.P.A. [Pacific Coast Women’s Press Association] on the topic ‘Should Literary Women Marry.’” This very headline elucidates the media as a patriarchal tool that regulated gender by subjecting literary women to public scrutiny. Following this incident, Gilman was a frequent target of the press; as she put it, “My name became a football for all the papers on the coast” (*Living* 143). These events in her private life

occurred as she was finishing and attempting to publish "The Yellow Wall-Paper."¹⁰

In the context of Gilman's experiences with the press, the story's vilification of paper can be seen as a professional critique of the newspaper industry as well as a personal and feminist response to her own exploitation. As the narrator explains of the wallpaper, "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you" (25). The resemblance between the press's treatment of Gilman and the wallpaper's effect upon the narrator suggest that Gilman was deeply concerned, early on in her career, with making and preserving a name for herself in a hostile professional world that judged her according to a harsh double standard. That the narrator initially visualizes more than one woman behind the wallpaper makes sense in light of the fact that Gilman herself was represented in various inaccurate ways by the newspapers. As Denise Knight writes, "Despite her repeated failures to cooperate with the press, or perhaps because of it, Gilman continued to find herself the subject of new stories" (50–51). Similarly, the narrator explains, "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one. . . . And she is trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so: I think that is why it has so many heads" (30). The many heads of the woman behind the wallpaper might mirror the various representations of Gilman constructed by the press, and the fact that she is strangled points to the fact that the press has not only multiplied and invented versions of her but it has also muted and silenced her.

Gilman's portrayal of wallpaper may also offer an indictment of the intensifying culture of mass publicity, a culture to whose assent the newspaper was instrumental. In its unyielding surveillance of the narrator, the wallpaper resembles the prying, intrusive gaze of reporters, photographers, and even novelists. As the narrator observes, "This paper looks to me as it if knew what a vicious influence it had! . . . Those absurd blinking eyes are everywhere" (16). This characterization of the wallpaper as something watching and scrutinizing her, links it to the probing, omnipresent media of the late nineteenth century. In an 1881 lecture, Charles Dudley Warner asserted, "Almost everybody talks about the violation of decency and the sanctity of private life by the newspaper in the publication of personalities and the gossip of society" (281). In relentlessly compromising the narrator's privacy, the wallpaper signals the disintegration of private domestic space and the dominance of a technologically driven obsession with publicity.¹¹ In response to the "hovering," "skulking" presence of the wallpaper, the narra-

tor attempts to preserve her privacy, and she becomes increasingly paranoid about sharing the details of her life with the reader (28–29). Once eager to write and confide her thoughts, the narrator becomes secretive and private. Near the end of the narrative, she writes, “I have found out another funny thing, but I shan’t tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much” (31). In stark contrast with the narrator’s earlier confessional tone, she becomes aware that her most private sentiments can easily be exploited and distorted, much like Gilman’s own personal life. Near the end of the story, she writes, “To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise. . . . Besides I wouldn’t do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued” (34–35). The narrator’s wariness about her behavior being “misconstrued” resembles Gilman’s own fear of being exposed, injuriously, by the press.¹² Moreover, that it is the narrator’s contemplation of literally throwing herself outside of the domestic realm that causes her to worry about being deemed improper calls to mind the criticism that Gilman herself received for being a mother who maintained such a public professional existence.

In light of her personal and professional relationship to sensational journalism, we might read Gilman’s portrayal of the wallpaper, and the narrator’s relationship to it, as the first of the many critiques she made of the yellow press throughout her career. In a 1906 poem called “The Yellow Reporter,” Gilman gives a harsh denunciation of yellow journalism:

Under the Press Power great and wide
Their unsigned slanders cower and hide
From outraged Justice they slink behind
Shadowy Companies false and blind.¹³ (*Later* 46)

Here, she takes issue with journalists for publishing lies under pseudonyms that allow them to “cower and hide” instead of facing potential lawsuits for libel or defamation. That the ethical and intellectual deterioration of the press was a source of concern for Gilman is clear. But what is perhaps more significant is that, in describing the yellow journalists, she uses precisely the same terms—“slink behind” and “cower and hide”—that the narrator uses to describe the yellow wallpaper, terms that reveal the profound impact of the newspaper culture on her fiction.

If we read “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as a comment on contemporary journalism, its feminist implications extend beyond the rest cure and the medical establishment: the story seems, instead, to be principally concerned with women’s relationship to print culture. We might recall that, as Paula

Treichler has pointed out, "the central issue in this particular story [is] the narrator's alienation from work, writing, and intellectual life" (62). This alienation intensifies as the story progresses, and Gilman underscores the detrimental effects of the wallpaper, in particular, upon the narrator's productivity as an author. The more energy the narrator exhausts attempting to make sense of the wallpaper, the less inclination she has to write. "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. . . . The effort is getting to be greater than the relief" (21). Later, she writes, "It's getting to be a great effort for me to think straight" (21). The narrator's struggle for coherence manifests itself in the story, her journal, which does become increasingly disjointed and unclear as it progresses.

Critics have read the narrator's detachment from her own writing as the result of her controlling husband and the rest cure he administers. Indeed, the relationship between the narrator and John has long been read as symbolic of the gender inequalities that characterized both the medical and marital institutions of the 1890s. With his exclusive rights to diagnose and interpret, John serves as a marker for patriarchy's monopoly on a variety of discursive practices. In their influential study, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as a text that centrally concerns a woman writing herself out of patriarchy's representation of her. For Gilbert and Gubar, the woman behind the wallpaper is the narrator's feminine subjectivity, imprisoned by a misogynistic society's misrepresentations. Their reading provides an important way of understanding the wallpaper as a metaphor for patriarchal oppression, and yet the metaphor can be extended even further. By reading the wallpaper as a newspaper, we can localize the "patriarchal text." Gilman's depiction of the narrator as oppressed and dominated by the wallpaper is not only symbolic of her own oppression by a patriarchal society, but more specifically, the narrator's fraught engagement with the wallpaper enables a consideration of the press as a crucial player in the misrepresentation of Gilman and her female contemporaries. Moreover, by placing the story within the context of the late-nineteenth-century media industry, we can read the narrator's relationship to John as structurally analogous to Gilman's relationship with the mass media. As someone who asks the narrator "all sorts of questions," John may represent not just medicine but the mass media, which also maintained a right to interrogate and interpret women's texts, bodies, and lives (32).

In its depiction of a woman lacking both privacy and intellectual autonomy, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" prefigures *Women and Economics*, Gilman's provocative 1898 study of the economic relations between the sexes. In *Women and Economics*, she writes, "For the woman there is, first, no free

production allowed; and, second, no relation maintained between what she does produce and what she consumes. . . . Thus we have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully maintain among us an enormous class of non-productive consumers" (117). While not solely responsible for the evolution of women into a "class of non-productive consumers," the newspapers and magazines of the 1880s and 1890s certainly contributed to this change in female reading and spending habits. According to Christopher Wilson, magazines and newspapers contributed directly to the rise of a consumer culture that glorified homemaking and encouraged women to identify with consumer products. For Gilman, who sought to bind together a female reading community through her publications, women's susceptibility to the mass media and particularly to media representations of ideal womanhood, was troublesome and threatening. We might recognize Gilman's frustration with the dissolution of the female reading community in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," in which the narrator's isolation is one of the most startling, and perhaps maddening, aspects of the story for both the reader and for the narrator herself. Early on, the narrator writes, "It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work" (16). Her lack of intellectual companionship is particularly discouraging because the only other female character, Jennie, her husband's sister, aligns herself with the medical/male establishment and does not seem to sympathize or identify with the narrator. As the narrator explains, Jennie "hopes for no better profession" than housekeeping and nursing (18). Jennie even adopts some of John's strategies; she interrogates and monitors the narrator: "I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give" (32). With Jennie as a reporter and her husband as an interpreter, or editor, the narrator becomes the subject of a panoptic, invasive journalistic investigation.

To unite women and to combat the male-dominated press, Gilman relied heavily on speeches and nonfiction, which she published in a variety of journals, including several of which she herself edited—among them *The Impress*, *The Californian*, and finally *The Forerunner*. Through these publications, Gilman sought to rouse women readers to consider their place in a patriarchal society. While she did write fiction, Gilman was committed to being taken seriously as a social critic, not an artist. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes, "Didactic to the core, both journalism and fiction were for Gilman what she once called 'writing for a purpose'" (236). Her mission was to create a space for rational-critical debate and intellectualism in an age that placed greater value on scandal and gossip. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" itself was written expressly for the purpose of putting an end to Weir Mitchell's

rest cure, and she claimed in various memoirs that the treatment was altered subsequent to the story's publication.¹⁴

However, it is clear that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" poses a less effective challenge to other kinds of patriarchal authority. While I have sought to demonstrate the resemblances between the wallpaper and the contemporary newspaper and suggested that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" might offer a pre-scient critique of yellow journalism, it is necessary to reconcile such a reading with the story's obvious debt to sensationalism. Although Gilman sought throughout her career to undermine the popular press, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" represents less a break with sensationalism than a seeming submission to its form and style. That is, even as the descriptions of the wallpaper and its effects upon the narrator operate as a condemnation of sensational journalism, the story itself borrows from the very practices it seems to reject. When "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was published in *The New England Magazine* in 1892, many reviews expressed both discomfort and fascination with its sensational elements. One reader, whose letter was published in *The Boston Transcript*, wrote: "It is graphically told, in a somewhat sensational style, which makes it difficult to lay aside, after the first glance, till it is finished, holding the reader in morbid fascination to the end" (*Living* 120). Similarly, an anonymous 1899 review published in *Time and the Hour* called the story "a well-done, horrible book,—a book to keep away from the young wife" (Dock 108). And H. E. Scudder, then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, refused to publish "The Yellow Wall-Paper," claiming, "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!" (*Living* 119). It is difficult to ignore the similarities between these responses to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the charges made against yellow journalism and sensational writing more generally.

Given Gilman's explicit commitment to instructive literature and the realist nature of most of her short fiction, the chilling and sensational features of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" are both puzzling and anomalous. And while Gilman did compare her story to those of Poe, she also maintained "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was "no more 'literature' than my other stuff, definitely being written 'with a purpose'" (*Living* 121). Critics have tended to explain the sensational elements of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by assimilating them into Gilman's feminism. For example, Carol Davison reads the story as an example of the female gothic, and she sees Gilman using the gothic genre as a means of "renovating an extremely popular and well-established house of fiction" (49). While it may be tempting to read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as gothic, such a classification does not resolve the paradox between the story's form and Gilman's aesthetic and intellectual goals. Instead of categorizing the

novel as gothic or as sensational, a distinction made virtually impossible by what Dana Luciano has called the “slipperiness of the boundary between the two genres,” it is significant that Gilman’s techniques were clearly in marked contrast with the kinds of writing she claimed to value (315).

Recalling the conditions under which Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is useful in explaining its generic location as well as the discrepancy between readers’ assessments of the story and Gilman’s own understanding of it. In her autobiography, Gilman recounts a conversation with Theodore Dreiser, then an editor of *The Delineator*, who advised her to “consider more what editors want.” In response to this suggestion, Gilman writes, “If one writes to express important truths, needed yet unpopular, the market is necessarily limited” (*Living* 304). Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wall-Paper” shortly after her separation from Charles Walter Stetson, during the first years in which she was responsible for supporting herself financially, and was consequently more reliant than ever on the market.¹⁵ While she sought to carve out a new genre, a sex-neutral discourse, to accomplish her political and reformist goals, Gilman certainly also felt pressure to produce something profitable.¹⁶ Perhaps this tension between her ambition to “express important truths” and her need to make a living manifests itself in the increasing pressure of the wallpaper on the narrator. In the narrator’s conflicted response to the wallpaper, we might see Gilman’s own ambivalence about adopting a sensational style.

In “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” sensational writing is explicitly linked to women, as the narrator is presumed to have an “imaginative power and a habit of story-making” (15). However, Gilman draws attention to the faultiness of this assumption, and its implied expectation that women’s intellectual projects must be fanciful and creative, by depicting the narrator’s relationship to the wallpaper as supremely rational and, at times, almost empirical; she seeks to “follow the pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (19). By foregrounding this misconception about the nature of the narrator’s intellect, Gilman seems committed to refuting the notion that women are whimsical story makers. However, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” itself, in spite of its feminist subtext, does not signify a challenge to the notion of gendered genres. The narrator’s simultaneous repulsion by and attraction to the wallpaper’s pattern seems to imitate Gilman’s own implication in a literary economy that was both saturated in sensation and committed to preserving genre distinctions based on gender. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” neither “criticizes [n]or endorses the culture of consumption. . . . [I]t *exemplifies* that culture” (27). Though I do read the story as an indictment of sensational journalism, the wallpaper’s ultimate enfolding of the

narrator into its chaotic pattern mirrors what I see as Gilman's inability to extricate herself from the market and the discursive practices it demanded. Rather than an absolute triumph over the wallpaper, then, the story's ending reveals the force of material conditions—which not only prevent the narrator from true liberation but also prevent Gilman herself from completely abandoning the generic practices she disdained.

The story's reliance on sensationalism might represent the way in which the literary marketplace tended to dictate women's authorial decisions, particularly decisions of genre. Louisa May Alcott, for example, also wrote crowd-pleasing sensational stories for their financial rewards, and like Gilman, she portrayed her struggle with the market in her fiction, most clearly with the character of Jo March in *Little Women* (1869). Upon realizing their market potential, Jo anonymously publishes several gothic-inflected stories in the *Weekly Volcano* until Professor Bhaer, a spokesman for artistic integrity, prompts her to realize that her stories "are trash. . . . [E]ach is more sensational than the last. . . . I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money" (280). Subsequently, Jo turns back to didactic fiction for which she can find no publisher. Thus, we might remember that genre may be less an artistic choice than a financial one, and perhaps Gilman, along with her narrator, had to succumb to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" before she could align her aesthetics with her politics.¹⁷

In its form as well as in its central narrative, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" foregrounds competition among professional, political, and popular discourses, and as I have argued, the rise of yellow journalism exacerbated this discursive struggle through its influence on the literary marketplace. By catering to the burgeoning consumer culture's demand for fast-paced, scandal-driven stories, sensational journalism regulated literary production as well as gender, and Gilman was only one of many writers whose artistic and political ambitions did not always correspond to these public demands. As we continue to understand Gilman as a feminist, we must also consider her as a professional writer whose works can be read as an extended meditation on female authority and the fate of socially conscious writing in the turn-of-the-century print marketplace.

NOTES

1. There has been some critical controversy over the date of the coinage of the phrase. Mark Winchester makes a case for 1898 in "The Yellow Kid and the Coining of 'Yellow Journalism.'" Joseph Campbell argues that journalist Ervin Wardman coined the term in 1897, three months after the Yellow Kid rivalry began.

2. On Gilman's nativism, see Seidler; chapter 4 of Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 121–69; and Alys Eve Weinbaum's *Wayward Reproductions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3. In 1881, Charles Dudley Warner gave a lecture entitled "The American Newspaper," in which he examined the decline of the newspaper as a symptom of its increasing status as a business enterprise.

4. Also, beginning in the late 1880s, Charles Scribner and Sons began their Yellow Paper Series, in which they published popular literature, including works by Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable, in yellow covers.

5. It was not only the reading of newspapers that supposedly led to these intellectual and psychological consequences. As Barbara Hochman has pointed out, the narrator's response to the wallpaper also bears resemblance to what were considered the pernicious effects of reading certain types of popular fiction. She writes, "If we imagine the wall-paper as a fictional text—sometimes dull and repetitive but also flamboyant, outrageous, self-contradictory, and repellant—we might see it as a sentimental or sensational work, the sort denounced by many nineteenth-century critics, especially those who were partial to realism" (96).

6. Charles Mellvaine similarly called the "newspaper-habit a vicious foe to concentration of thought [and] highly pernicious to consecutive thinking" (278).

7. The American Antiquarian Society holds a small collection of these wallpaper-newspapers. For more information on these newspapers, see Clarence S. Brigham's essay, "Wall-paper Newspapers of the Civil War," in *Bibliographical Essays, A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924): 203–09.

8. I am borrowing the term "eugenic feminism" from Dana Seidler, who uses it to refer to the ideological conflation of the racial purity movement with feminism at the turn of the century.

9. In her autobiography, Gilman writes, "Finally, in the fall of '87, in a moment of clear vision, we agreed to separate, to get a divorce" (*Living* 96).

10. In her essay on Gilman's relationship with William Randolph Hearst, Denise Knight notes that Gilman's earliest encounter with a Hearst paper occurred in the fall of 1892 (47).

11. In 1890, the same year that Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren published "The Right to Privacy" in the *Harvard Law Review*. In it, they argue: "Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that 'what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops'" (202).

12. Throughout her life, Gilman expressed her fear of being exposed by the press. In a letter written to Houghton Gilman in 1899, she articulated her anxiety about newspapers sensationalizing her private life: "You ought to know that there is the possibility of such letters being dragged out some day. . . . There is more than one person on earth who could make things very unpleasant for me if they tried. . . . [Y]ou must consider the disagreeable practical possibilities like this. Fancy San Francisco papers with a Profound Sensation in Literary Articles! Revelations of a Peculiar Past! Mrs. Stetson's Love Affair with a Woman. Is this Friendship! and so on" (Gilman, *Journey* 246). I am indebted to

Gill Frank for bringing this reference to my attention.

13. This particular poem, titled "The Yellow Reporter," was unpublished during Gilman's lifetime. It is dated 1906.

14. In the October 1913 issue of *The Forerunner*, Gilman wrote of the story: "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" ("Why" 19–20). She repeated her claim about the story's effectiveness in her autobiography. After hearing that Dr. Mitchell had changed his treatment since reading "The Yellow Wall-Paper," she writes, "If this is a fact, I have not lived in vain" (*Living* 121). Though no evidence has been found to corroborate this claim, it is significant that Gilman chose to emphasize her story's efficacy in subsequent publications.

15. Shortly after the story's publication, Gilman wrote a letter to *The New England Magazine* asking whether or not they planned to pay her. She writes, "I never got a cent for it till later publishers brought it out in book form, and very little then. . . . All these literary efforts providing but little, it was well indeed that another avenue of work opened to me at this time" (*Living* 121).

16. In 1891, during the same period in her life, Gilman also published "The Giant Wistaria," a short ghost story.

17. While the majority of Gilman's fiction is straightforward and instructive, her recently published novel, *Unpunished*, is steeped in the conventions of the murder mystery. Like "The Yellow Wall-Paper," *Unpunished* was written at a point in Gilman's life when financial concerns seemed to have outweighed aesthetic and political considerations.

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The Madwoman's Other Sisters

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gloria Naylor,
and the Re-Inscription of Loss*

CAROLINE BROWN

[W]e have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully maintain among us an enormous class of non-productive consumers,—a class which is half the world, and mother of the other half. We have built into the constitution of the human race the habit and desire of taking. . . . We have made for ourselves this endless array of “horse-leech’s daughters, crying, Give! give!” To consume food, to consume clothes, to consume houses and furniture and decorations and ornaments and amusements, to take and take and take forever,—from one man if they are virtuous, from many if they are vicious, but always to take and never to think of giving anything in return except their womanhood,—this is the enforced condition of the mothers of the race.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (118–19)

[W]hen I put Willa in that basement my overall idea was to have this very conservative upper-middle-class black woman through her discovery of all those remnants from the past wives who’d lived in that house, just get up, walk out of there and say, “No, this is shallow. This is not for me.” I wanted her to learn from those lessons in history. But what eventually evolved through all the pain that she went through was the discovery that she liked being where she was—a conventional housewife. And there is this moment when she says not only to the reader, but to me—“I was a good wife and a good mother. And I’m not going to apologize to anyone for that.” That was a real surprise to me; I hadn’t planned on the character doing that.

—Gloria Naylor, “A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison”
(Montgomery 16)

I.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the nineteenth-century narrator, effectively locked in an attic suite of a colonial mansion as a part of her treatment for neurasthenia, suffers a psychic collapse. She is fed to indulgence, forced into a state of physical idleness, socially isolated, and forbidden to do what she loves most—write. Her husband teases her with infantilizing nicknames and promises her freedom once she allows her health to improve. Bored, she fixates on the dizzying wallpaper that symbolizes her captivity, ultimately imagining herself as the woman she perceives trapped behind its bars. Her physician husband has instigated and supports her treatment.

In the twentieth-century novel *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor, Willa Prescott Nedeed has been locked in the basement of the family mansion by Luther, her precise and emotionally withholding husband. Enraged that the chocolate-complexioned Willa has given birth to a pale-skinned son, a child who, in fact, bears the traits of the anonymous female ancestors of his paternal line, Luther decides to get rid of the child and discipline its mother. Willa consequently is starved, forced into a state of physical idleness, socially isolated, and taunted with promises of release once she admits her guilt and rehabilitates herself. Luther is a well-respected, though secretly loathed and feared, leader of Linden Hills, the upper-middle-class, African American enclave founded by his forebears.

I open with these two strikingly similar though distinctive texts in order to meditate on how writers create conversations across place and time. A central struggle in twentieth-century women's literature and letters of the United States has been the search for intellectual foremothers, the remapping of a vast network of traditions, the fostering of new conceptions of how they are constructed. More than a search for identity, which assumes an isolated, though valid, undertaking, a search for artistic genealogy permits a wider understanding of the individual thinker in relation to community, of community itself, and of the ideology that informs its rituals and structure. For women in the United States, the traditions that intersect to form our literary and intellectual canons have often been products of the same entrenched forms of stratification and divisions, including around race, class, and sexuality, that trouble a multiplicity of other often more immediate interactions. The reality in the United States for black and white women, in particular, is that the experience of self and community has largely taken place within intraracial paradigms. Or as Hazel Carby stresses in warning against an essentialized feminism:

in order to establish the common grounds for a unified women's movement, material differences in the lives of working-class and middle-class women or white and black women have been dismissed. The search to establish that these bonds of sisterhood have always existed has led to a feminist historiography and criticism which denies the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and often takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as a norm. (17)

Nevertheless, the larger record reveals the ongoing interactions, alliances, and antagonisms—political, economic, cultural, and personal—that have marked this collective history.¹

Distinctive authors each, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Gloria Naylor are profoundly marked by era, place, and race. There is nothing inevitable in their juxtaposition. But I believe that creating a dialogue between their respective works permits the emergence of a conversation that ponders the specificities, intersections, and fault lines of how we envision the larger literary tradition and feminism itself. Borrowing from Ann duCille, I want to acknowledge the complexity of these oftentimes elusive and ephemeral exchanges. For as she argues about the framing of an African American literary tradition, we cannot

continue to claim an African American literary tradition as an island, entire unto itself, separate from and uninfluenced by so-called white cultural constructs and Western literary conventions. Intertextuality cannot be defined as movement solely from black text to black text, from one black author to another. Rather, such resonances must be viewed as cutting across racial identities, cultural spaces, and historical moments. (9)

For instance, one could easily place Gloria Naylor in the chain of artistic descent arising from nineteenth-century black women novelists, their modern-day successor and literary progeny. Yet, when Naylor refers to works by postbellum black women writers, her reticence feels instructive:

black women in our literature were continually depicted as overly chaste and virtuous. Novels such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's *Contending Forces* had light-skinned heroines whose sterling morals were instruments in the cause of racial uplift . . . [;] always at the center of the issue were black women, whose sexuality was believed to reflect upon the entire race. And black female sexuality was therefore whitened and deadened to the point of invisibility. (Naylor, "Love and Sex" 22)

As well documented by contemporary scholars,² for African American women writing in the postbellum era, gender was by necessity subordinated to race, particularly in the increasingly discriminatory world of the United States of the post-Reconstruction era. Referred to as the "nadir" of African American history, these postbellum/pre-Harlem Renaissance decades were "characterized by the emergence of increasingly virulent racist ideologies, disenfranchisement, denial of public services, and white mob violence" (Peterson 36). With the internationalism and economic power of the Gilded Age, African Americans were further sacrificed to the cause of white, nationalistic unity; scapegoated as degenerate perpetrators of violence; and portrayed as the incarnation of a debased sexuality. In an era in which African Americans were consumed by issues revolving around economic survival, political enfranchisement, and social justice, a desperate need developed for images of strength, endurance, and triumph. Thus emerged the often creaky prototypes of which Naylor complains—an earnest but suspect goodness, an idealized black woman purified by her relative whiteness.

I believe that Gloria Naylor's ambivalence is in part linked to the fact that her agenda arises from a political position related, though far from identical, to Gilman's. While their heroines are duly conflicted and hedged in by pressing social obstacles, both authors write from a space of assumed freedom and theoretical—if not lived—equality. Gilman is a product of the New Woman movement, which challenged the limited socioeconomic opportunities and political conservatism of the previous generation. On the other hand, Naylor's own convictions are the result of her experiencing tangentially the black liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Even more insistently, they may reflect her conflicted response to both civil-rights gains, which further eroded black cultural and political unity, and the women's rights movement.³ As a result, Gilman's and Naylor's protagonists embody a fraught agency that is easily eroded by those oppressive forces that would seem to nurture and sustain them. While race informs the challenges experienced by their characters, their characters' positions are overwhelmingly determined by their gender status and class privilege, which neither character is prepared to relinquish.

Yet Charlotte Perkins Gilman is admittedly a controversial figure to read in relation to Naylor. Although a feminist committed to politically progressive principles and reformist causes, Gilman exhibited the tensions of the epoch. As Susan Lanser explains:

If we locate Gilman's story within the "psychic geography" of Anglo-America at the turn of the century, we locate it in a culture obsessively preoccupied

with race as the foundation of character, a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of massive immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe, a culture openly anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, anti-Catholic, and Jim Crow. . . . Across the United States, newly formed groups were calling for selective breeding, restricted entry, and “American Protection” of various kinds. White, Christian, American-born intellectuals . . . not only shared this racial anxiety, but . . . “blazed the way for ordinary nativists” by giving popular racism an “intellectual respectability.” (425–26)

These assumptions inform Gilman’s assertions about human culture and the relative worth of different social systems and racial groups. In *Women and Economics*, for instance, she argues that so important is the civilizing influence of Anglo-American society that “it would be better for a child to-day to be left absolutely without mother or family of any sort, in the city of Boston . . . than to be supplied with a large and affectionate family and be planted with them in Darkest Africa” (180). Relying on the logic of social Darwinism, she also insists that the purpose of motherhood “is to reproduce the race by reproducing the individual; secondarily, to improve the race by improving the individual. The mere office of reproduction is as well performed by the laying of eggs to be posthumously hatched as by many years of exquisite devotion; but in the improvement of the species we come to other requirements” (178). Whether one reads Gilman’s assertion of “race” to mean humanity as a species or as a particular biological category based on phenotypic divisions of humankind supposedly reflecting more deeply inheritable traits—and the two are fairly fluid—what is striking in her argument is how simultaneously radical it is in its feminist rejection of the inevitability of maternity and reactionary in its racialism and ethnocentrism. Inflected by the pseudoscientific doctrines of the nineteenth century, it is less informed by the logic of either nature or nurture than the influences of racialist and ethnocentric notions of cultural value. Her ideology reveals profound fears of individual, and thus social, degeneration resulting from contamination by inferior cultural influences: “Human functions are race-functions, social functions; and education is one of them” (180). Or as Lanser further points out, in spite of her “socialist values, her active participation in movements for reform, her strong theoretical commitment to racial harmony, her unconventional support of interracial marriages, and her frequent condemnation of America’s racist history” (429), Gilman’s firm belief in the superiority of white, upper-class, Protestant culture influenced her often visionary politics. As a result, she exhibited the intellectual contradictions of a radical political agenda that was unable to divest itself of its own forms of privilege.

On the other hand, few critics have examined Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* along with texts by non-black women writers.⁴ Naylor herself has not commented on those connections. A generous interviewee who has written several articles on her work and the works of other writers, she has not acknowledged Gilman's influence and, as mentioned, has only referred to black, postbellum women authors ambivalently and in passing. Still, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's and Gloria Naylor's literary paths cross in telling ways, particularly in both women's embrace of their role as intellectual activists committed to feminist principles, if not always adhering to all aspects of its ideological tenets. Most strikingly, both women came into intellectual and artistic maturity at revolutionary moments for women writers; for each, the written word, and the career allowed by it, permitted a kind of intellectual and emotional salvation.

Gilman, though experiencing childhood economic deprivation when her family was abandoned by her father, possessed the cultural capital of her racial status, ethnic and regional identity, and family connections, particularly her relationships to her paternal Beecher aunts of the powerful New England clan. Investing in an idealized vision of domesticity, she ignored her misgivings and abandoned her earlier artistic training for the role of wife and mother; as is well documented, the restrictive medical treatment and subsequent emotional collapse provided the biographical material for her seminal work of short fiction, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Gilman's rejection of the enforced passivity symbolized by her status as a conventional wife and mother allowed her the courage to pursue a utopian feminism; her subsequent career included work as a sociologist, novelist, poet, short-story writer, journalist, and lecturer for social reform. Rather than an isolated individual experience, her career was made possible by earlier generations of female activism and a potent wave of woman's suffrage agitation that permitted her to fill an important cultural niche and thus to craft a professional identity.

Naylor, the child of working-class, segregated New York City, is one generation removed from rural, Jim Crow Mississippi. The oldest of three daughters, hers was a close family deeply bound to Southern black culture and the warmth of extended family networks. Unlike Gilman, she did not have an easily bartered cultural capital; like her, however, she had important role models in strong, authoritative female relatives. As significantly, a shy child and adolescent, literature became an intellectual refuge for her. After having devoted her young adulthood to work as a missionary with the Jehovah's Witnesses, she was disillusioned with institutional religion and realized she had few marketable skills. In addition, a brief marriage ended in divorce. She thus decided to pursue a higher education. In the process, she wrote *The*

Women of Brewster Place, which won an American Book Award for First Fiction in 1983. *Linden Hills*, her second novel, was her MA thesis at Yale University. For Naylor, writing functioned both as a balm and a form of political engagement: “It pulled me out of a severe depression [and] symbolized me finally taking hold of myself and attempting to take my destiny in my own hands” (7). As with Gilman, Naylor’s career can be viewed within a larger trajectory of African American women’s literary participation. As with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, her most immediate and well-known predecessors, a niche was being created for black women’s authorial voices. While in no small part a response to aggressive marketing on the part of the publishing industry and the mainstream hunger for novelty, it also mirrored the increasingly assertive presence of black women as political agents and consumers.

Thus, not only are Gilman and Naylor the first generation of women authors in their respective cultural categories to have an extensive and ongoing presence as self-supporting writers, but they accomplished this by using a strategic feminism to interrogate the role of women in their own marginalization. Specifically, each offers an unsparing critique of unchallenged patriarchal dominance. Yet, in doing so, both expose women’s often contradictory relationships to masculine power. Through the trope of madness, both writers explore the damage sexist systems cause individual women. Gilman exposes the psychological havoc produced by a supposedly well-intentioned, but profoundly misogynistic, condescension. Intriguingly, however, by contrasting the white woman locked in the relative opulence of the attic with black women hidden in the obscurity of the basement—the figurative space traditionally assigned to African Americans in the United States—Naylor not only makes a statement on the relative worth of each but is forcing a reenvisioning of the lives of black and white women themselves, creating intertextual references that force the rethinking of each tradition and the larger social systems informing them. Class is a central factor in this equation, particularly its nuances, inconsistencies, and pointed ironies.

In focusing on middle-class black women in *Linden Hills*, Naylor disrupts discourses in which blackness is equated with poverty, including the urban poverty depicted in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Just as significantly, she demystifies the aura of economic privilege as the inevitable site of racial aspiration, forcing an acknowledgment of how the political use of race obscures the multiplicity of African American identity. Naylor’s middle-class blacks, contemporary professionals, perform an elaborate show of self-satisfied achievement in order to fully prove their realization of the American Dream. Yet the hollowness of their lives reverberates as if in an echo chamber. In a

similar manner, the frustrated yearning and sorrow at the core of prior generations of Mrs. Luther Nedeed is unearthed by Willa in her basement prison. As she stewes in her own anger turned to anxiety and then capitulation, Willa discovers the anguish that informs the existences of several generations of Luther's foremothers, all simply referred to as Mrs. Luther Nedeed—which diminishes the reality of the distinct woman beneath the honorary title. Like Willa, these women are buried in the basement. The vague, spectral presences whose works include cookbooks, a journal, and photos—the paratexts of their family and larger community—they whisper and howl but remain largely ignored save for Willa, who refuses to identify with their pain and loss, which she resentfully translates as failure.

And here I return to Gilman's anonymous narrator who drives herself mad. Ignored by her husband and forbidden to work, her restless brain manufactures drama. She first writes, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (30). Later, "Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able—to dress and entertain, and order things" (33). Then, "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time" (37). She is in a position that many would envy. In the United States of the Gilded Age with its extremes of rich and poor, the latter vastly outnumbering the former, she is married to a member of the professional elite who dotes on her. But his regard is conditional. A symbol of his class status, revealing that he is able to support a spouse whose only form of labor is the engendering of children, she is expected to expend rather than produce; her primary function is the generating of desire. Consequently, he both showers her with affection and refuses to acknowledge either her intellectual competence or her adult status.

Similarly, the Nedeedes refuse their spouses true regard or affection. But here, Naylor carefully reenvisions the inscribed history of the black middle class (W. E. B. DuBois's "talented tenth") of bodies and temperaments disciplined, supposedly having transcended what Toni Morrison calls the "funk" of sexual desire and working-class culture.⁵ Committed to morally upstanding behavior and charitable concern for the folk, these are the individuals who promise, in the words of Paula Giddings, to lift the impoverished even as they climb to further heights of professional and social achievement.⁶ Naylor's women, material traces of their lives locked in the basement with Willa, ever in the process of disintegration, reveal their rage, thwarted desire, and aborted potential in their private and forgotten papers. This portrayal becomes a necessary corrective to the strong black women, invariably beautiful mulattas, who triumphed over social obstacles and united politically with their darker brethren, whether in the pages of fiction or the propaganda of

the political leadership. The willful Iola Leroy of Frances Harper's pen and the vulnerable but spirited Sappho Clark fashioned by Pauline Hopkins morph into *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, *The Awakening's* Edna Pontellier, and the anonymous narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper." As with the postbellum black heroines of African American fiction, Naylor's women are made vulnerable by a racism exacerbated by their gender status, leading lives distorted by the need for pressing racial and social change. Significantly, however, they are less menaced by rapacious white men, whether slave owners, the brutal and resentful working-class mercenaries in their hire, or two-faced members of the Euro-American, postbellum bourgeoisie, than by their own loved ones, whether husband, son, or neighbor. They, unlike the characters created by earlier generations of African American women writers, face, much more immediately and insistently, emotional terrorism within the confines of their own homes. The home, the sacred domestic space of the Victorian True Woman, leisured and indulged, becomes a prison that obscures her isolation and psychic alienation.

Luwana Packerville, the teenaged wife of the founder of the Nedeed dynasty, bought out of Southern chattel slavery by her husband only to be reenslaved by him as both legal wife and bondswoman, writes in a journal to express her growing bewilderment, boredom, and disillusionment. For her, her journal becomes her only form of companionship. Tellingly, it is written in a Bible, an intensely patriarchal text that she feminizes through her confession, putting phallic pen to the "blank page" of female creativity (Gubar 292–313; Gilbert and Gubar, 89–92). Her entries are placed carefully in specific sections, reflecting the evolving stages of her life with Luther. Between Genesis and Exodus, she writes: "We are going north in a fortnight to a place called Linden Hills. I leave this state with rejoicing. A new land. A new life" (*Linden Hills* 118). Before Leviticus, she describes the confusing rules given to her by Luther about housekeeping and diet (118). Between 1st and 2nd Kings, she weans the two-year-old Luther, Jr., understanding the awfulness of her situation: "He told me to prepare a special supper because, when he returns, he wants to celebrate his son's manumission. . . . And if the love of God and all that is right cannot move this man, how can I hope to? So it is a bitter meal that I must cook to help celebrate the fact that I am now to be owned by my own son" (119). Eventually she performs a parody of wifely duty: she has no friends, feeling a pariah to both the black and white women in the local communities; she is not trusted to cook for her husband and son in this era of slave poisonings of masters' food; and she is almost deprived of her sole pleasure, her garden, which she can only tend in the warmer months anyway. Thus, her isolation and superfluousness lead her to

write long and empathetic letters back and forth to herself, her soul literally fracturing to provide the companionship she craves: "My Dearest Luwana, Your words grieved me sorely. . . ." / "My Dear Luwana, Thank you for being so prompt in your reply. . . ." (122) / "My Dear Luwana, I have not written in a year because I could see that you were growing impatient with me. I know that to continue in that vein would cause you to tire of writing to me so I needed to find some way to prove to you that what I said were not the delirious fantasies of a foolish woman" (123). Her grief ends in her Bible's first pages, realizing that her prayers will never be answered: "There can be no God" (125). Her pain consumes her, and she is lost to the silence of anger and hopelessness.

The metaphor of consumption is embodied quite literally in the cookbooks of Evelyn Creton Nedeed. The testaments of her life exist in endless recipes for excessive quantities of food, from potato casserole to walnut bread, which Willa realizes could not humanly have been eaten by so small a family. But the recipes become her testament to a life of desperation, the performing of a futile femininity that reveals "the relentless accuracy with which this woman measured her anguish" (190): musk and civet in orris root and mint for perfume; lemon juice and olive oil for hair; glycerin, almond paste, and pigeon fat for lotion. Ultimately creams to darken skin lead to potions to awaken sexual desire, then laxatives to combat earlier binges, and finally the prussic acid that marks her last entry on Christmas Eve. Her quest for perfection becomes a heartbreaking enactment of despair, repeating the earlier pattern.

The last recorded Mrs. Luther Nedeed, Priscilla McGuire, records her life in photographs, a lively and alluring young woman whose expression declares, "I knew you would come, and I'm so pleased to meet you" (205). She is captured standing stylishly with her Packard as a single woman, full of verve and daring. From a newlywed, erupting in laughter and mischief, she becomes a proud young matron with her husband and infant son. Year by year, her son is photographed maturing from his position on his mother's lap to her side, opposite his father. While Priscilla eventually receives a mother-of-the-year award, Willa notices that she is somehow overshadowed by both son and husband, becoming an increasingly nebulous presence in her meticulously arranged photo albums and scrapbooks: Priscilla "was no longer recording the growth of a child; the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence" (209). It appears inevitable that the performance of maternity and domesticity begins to take its toll: photo after photo is damaged. Priscilla's face is violently erased until at last, scrawled over the hole that used to be her face, appears the word "*me*" (249).

In all three cases, performing the role of the model wife, an undervalued and unappreciated activity that exists primarily to sanction the conception and birth of the next Luther Nedeed, leads to spiritual suicide. Unlike with Gilman's narrator, these women are given free reign to explore their creative potential. However, creativity ignored and unnurtured exists only to allow the continuation of the mirage of marriage, whether in recording its routines and irritations, using it to please a chilly and distant spouse, or permitting the persistence of the heteronormative status quo. The women cannot or will not leave and thereby remain trapped. What results is that imaginistic creativity becomes bodily self-destruction: self-scarring as tattoos that mark the days Luwana is verbally addressed by husband and son; Evelyn's excessive laxative use to hide obsessive eating that dulls the pain of sexual and emotional longing; Priscilla's damaged photos erasing her physical presence and mirroring her grief. As in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," social performance morphs into madness, most evocatively represented in each woman's embattled negotiation between speech and silence. Or as illuminated by Mae Gwendolyn Henderson:

In their works, black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of the black woman's relationship to power and discourse. Silence is an important element of this code. . . . In other words, it is not that black women, in the past, have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say. (24)

Entering the Western discursive tradition as an overdetermined signifying presence, her labor and progeny stolen within slave regimes, legally denied the privilege of reading and writing, in effect, of self-representation, she became a site of unintelligible, defeminized hypersexuality, exiled from the very discursive tradition that portrayed her and hers as hopelessly inferior. Naylor's exceedingly literate informants articulate the other extreme, which is the contradiction of female entitlement within patriarchy. Furthermore, pale-skinned, educated, and economically comfortable, these fictional creations are the recipients of a normative, though unseemly, preference and are thus both objects of masculine desire and rejected for the very intransigence of that desire. Their surveilled and silenced bodies become the manifestation of one of the fundamental tensions at the core of African American history and culture: the persistence of and relation to a colonizing whiteness in the midst of blackness. Yet, for Naylor, it is not simply the presence of a racially informed patriarchal desire, a desire that simultaneously denies its own existence as it constructs a supposedly pure and authentic black-

ness, which is under scrutiny. Rather, it is how women themselves become implicated in this desire, responding to, mobilizing, and narrating it. And here Gilman and Naylor most saliently intersect. Instead of simply passive victims, both authors create vivid portraits of women who, though actively victimized by sexist husbands and social systems, are nevertheless complicit in their own marginalization. Central to this is the performing of gender that women submit to in order to attain the status allowed by social acceptance and economic security within patriarchal systems of control. Writing this paradoxical privilege through gendered terms that reflect who is allowed to speak, how he or she will be heard, and when that individual will be silenced, Naylor and Gilman provide haunting portraits that destabilize the terms of the very equation they are in the midst of deciphering.

II.

In *Linden Hills*, Gloria Naylor describes Luther Nedeed at work:

His women were always like this. The lips were set barely parted with a clear gloss that highlighted their original color. She was so still lying there on her back. She had come to him that way, and he had treated her as he'd been taught. . . . With the proper touch, you could work miracles. Their skin wouldn't remain rigid and plastic if the fluid was regulated precisely. Just the right pressure and resistant muscles in the face, neck, arms and legs gave themselves up completely to your handling. Moved when you made them move, stayed where you placed them . . . ; it took gentleness and care to turn what was under your hands into a woman. (185)

Although respectful of the body and painstaking in his preparations, there is a disconcerting possessiveness influencing Luther's interaction with the cadaver. The elderly Lycentia Parker's corpse becomes an object of erotic intensity as he rehabilitates rotting tissue, transforming inanimate flesh to his feminine ideal. Incapable of responding, reacting, she has become an object of his chilly ardor. The subject of his artistic vision, she is easily subjugated to his will.

The five generations of Linden Hills's Luther Nedeeds have all served as the community's mortician, passing their particular skills from one generation to the next. Exploiting the segregation experienced by African Americans from birth to death, they not only created a thriving undertaking business that, like those of many other black families, allowed them to enter

the African American bourgeoisie, but they built a financial empire. Craftsmen fanatical about detail who are impassioned only by their entrepreneurial zeal and ambitions for the next generation of Luther Nedeed, they pride themselves on their unique ability to cultivate life without inordinate female interference. Or as Luther V reflects, casually enacting the ritual moment of female eradication as his own wife remains a prisoner in their basement, “He actually had to pause a moment in order to remember his mother’s first name, because everyone—including his father—had called her nothing but Mrs. Nedeed. And that’s all she had called herself” (18). Tellingly, his pregnant pause delivers only further anonymity. For Luther, absence becomes assent and his supposition authoritative history.

As Luther lingers over the body of Lycentia Parker, his latest client, I have decided to pause to contemplate the complementary sets of images provided by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Gloria Naylor in their respective explorations of female madness. In both Gilman’s compact short story, driven by a first-person narrative, and Naylor’s sprawling, polyglossic novel, the drama of female silencing becomes a metonym for a diversity of sexist behaviors not only condoned by the larger social system but fundamental to its efficient operation. In this gendered drama, spanning almost a century of national development, women, seemingly convinced of the sagacity and authority of their husband’s perspective, eventually lose faith in the efficacy of their own reason. Struggling to be heard by insensitive spouses, they are increasingly rendered mute and eventually driven to either a state of psychotic folly or enervating depression. At the core of this encounter, however, remains an image of the female corpse. As the Luthers appear unmoved by living women—women discerning, flawed, and emotionally complex, women yearning for spontaneous interaction and demanding to be heard, so John, the physician husband of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” emerges as more invested in his wife’s simulacra, her potential once she has submitted to the rest cure. This treatment becomes not only a form of rebirth into the potential of the True Woman via her symbolic infantilization, as noted by Elizabeth Ammons (36), but also a death of her more multifaceted, defective self. In both texts, the dead woman, angelic, vague, and frozen in an artificial perfection, embodies the seductive allure of the purely ornamental, that which all of the women will eventually be rendered. But mobilizing the production of the ornament, as underscored by David Cannadine, informing its beauty, iconic appeal, and seeming superfluity, is a systemic violence that must be exorcised and cleansed before it is then reintegrated into the body of the family and nation.⁷

Elizabeth Ammons identifies this violence in the regularizing role of medi-

cine, revealing how it is used in the subordination of women:

From the point of view of the physician, the male architect of the narrator's resocialization, the concept of the space in which she is confined is very simple. It is a jail; it allows an extremely limited view of the world; and it has at its center a bed. Site for a woman not only of birthing, dying, and sleeping but also, and probably most important for the story, of sexual intercourse and therefore a potent reminder in late nineteenth-century America of male sexual privilege and dominance, including violence, a bed, to the exclusion of all else, dominates the room in which the narrator has been confined and forbidden to write. (37)

Significantly, not only is John, her husband, a physician, but so is the narrator's brother, from whom she appears emotionally estranged. Dr. Weir Mitchell, the well-respected physician perceived by Gilman as the instrument of her near psychic collapse and the target of her textual critique,⁸ is briefly mentioned by the despairing protagonist as her ultimate destination should she fail to thrive under her current circumstances (36). For Ammons, the "reactionary power" (40) of the nineteenth-century medical establishment was built on the assumption of the biological inferiority of women, particularly as this new and increasingly liberated woman threatened preexisting gender hierarchies. Consequently, when John interacts with his progressively more agitated spouse, it is not simply as a husband; it is as a medical authority who has the power to determine the course of her treatment and its outcomes. His words therefore possess a social weight that easily undermines the credibility of his wife's anxieties, making them appear trivial and arbitrary. That he disciplines her, mixing veiled threats with erotic display, signifies the insidiousness, the coerciveness, of his position, an ambiguous blend of personal concern and institutional power.

Nothing could seem further from this medical authority, with its investment in the achievement of mental and physical equilibrium, than the mortician, preparing the dead for interment into their earthly wombs and passage to the afterlife. Yet the Luthers, like John, rigid and status oriented, reduce their spirited wives to the living dead, their self-confidence eroded, their rage dissipated by intellectual torpor and excessive isolation. Made objects of empty display once they give birth to the requisite son, they are not essential to the performance of domesticity. Rather, they are largely ignored by their husbands and expected to maintain their predetermined status in the grand scheme of Linden Hills, fulfilling the tenets of the leisure ethic with a killing vengeance.

However, as the men of science rely on medicine to preserve gender roles and justify female subordination, producing discourses that are disseminated, received as wisdom, then reproduced in turn, so the men of Linden Hills comprehend the vital role of historical knowledge. In *Linden Hills*, history is alive and malleable; as Luther insists, “Just stay right here; you step outside Linden Hills and you’ve stepped into history—someone else’s history about what you couldn’t ever do. The Nedeeds had made a history there and it spoke loudly of what blacks could do” (16). This process serves as the engine fueling the scholarly texts published by Dr. Daniel Brathwaite, the novel’s historian. Works that function as what he refers to as a “written photograph,” they are allegedly objective and devoid of his or any external interference: “Put your subject too much in the shade, too much in the light, dare to have even a fingernail touch the lens or any evidence of your personal presence, and you’ve invalidated it” (261). Because Brathwaite relies on documents provided by the Nedeeds, “survey reports, official papers from the Tupelo Realty Corporation, even the original bills of sale that date back to 1820” (259), as well as those from other sanctioned sources, he asserts that he has the “whole story, the real story if you will” (263). Yet he refuses to acknowledge the implication of his being “placed on this very spot as soon as [he] graduated from school” (264), and provided his ideal home with its unique bird’s eye view of the neighborhood, by the Nedeeds. Although he assumes he has somehow avoided complicity because his ambitions, unlike those of the vast majority of the community’s residents, have been intellectual and not material, he refuses to acknowledge his own embeddedness in the project of Linden Hills: “Yes, I’ve moved among them, eaten with them, laughed with them, but I’ve known my purpose here from the beginning and I’ve never let myself get too involved” (264). For Brathwaite, the official archive is enough, and history is exactly that: his/story—chronological, monologic, hierarchal, and transparent. A masculinist metanarrative effacing difference through a benign neglect that hides more distressing motives, history, like Linden Hills community members, is forced to perform the function of authenticating a suspect regime, a regime that because of its blackness and wealth asserts an unearned legitimacy and influence. That which Brathwaite most tellingly overlooks is the existence of the Nedeed wives. Their unofficial archives, which testify to the complexity of their lives and agency, remain unknown to him. Documents forgotten, ignored, or hidden by the Luthers themselves, these texts could render more multidimensional and perplexing the chronicle of African American history, culture, struggle, and achievement. Like the diary of the heroine of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” an endeavor eventually forsaken as she descends into obsession and psychosis, these products elu-

cidate the silences of lost lives, speaking truth to the falsehoods fabricated by those with institutional authority. They reveal how women are victimized by patriarchal social systems, hushed by discursive traditions they do not control. Luther's abusive disciplining of Willa is merely a variation of the psychological torture experienced by her antecedents, which in turn opens to scrutiny the medical treatment imposed on Gilman's distressed narrator. Though supposedly diametrically opposed—the former a criminal act leading to the murder of a child, the latter a psychological intervention condoned by the medical establishment—both have as their goals the regimenting and modifying of behaviors and personalities deemed unacceptable, revealing the misogyny at the root of patriarchy. Yet perhaps what I find most notable is not the sadistic sexism that both texts unravel in such unexpected and memorable ways but how each work demonstrates the compound strategies through which women become implicated in those systems that so assiduously diminish and disempower them.

In most respects, Willa, the last Mrs. Nedeed, and Gilman's narrator could not be more different. The latter, a nineteenth-century homemaker and new mother, descends into a hysteria precipitated in part from what appears to be postpartum depression. Young and full of intellectual aspirations, she longs for the self-expression and sense of vocation allowed by her writing. Reared to be a lady, through her breakdown she ultimately revolts against the domestic sphere and the intellectual inertia that it cultivates. Willa, in her mid-thirties, had a career and relationships with other men before she married Luther. From a working-class family, she enjoys the advantages conferred by being an economically comfortable wife and mother and appears contented with her life: "She cleaned his home, cooked his meals. His clothes were arranged, his social engagements organized. When he chose to talk about his work, she listened. And she was careful not to bring him petty household problems that might overburden him more than he already was" (279). While John lavishes his wife with affection and endearing soubriquets, Willa is troubled by Luther's reserve and perfunctory attentiveness, aware of a subtle emotional distance between them. Whereas Gilman's narrator feels indifferent to and overwhelmed by the need "to dress and entertain, and order things" (33), Willa embraces the catharsis of consumer excess: "So easy to put faith in the fact that she could well afford the biannual trip to New York and that walk down the miracle mile. . . . She had just enough time to fly back from New York and throw her purchases on the dresser before picking up the natural rhythms of her day, confident that Lancôme had told her to 'believe in the magic,' so that change was definitely on the way" (149). Even as one woman is locked in the oppressive domesticity of

economic and emotional dependence, her latter-day counterpart experiences the self-determination of the mature, late-twentieth-century woman who chooses marriage and family over career, having ready access to both private and public spheres and an easy mobility that permits her fluid integration of both.

Yet, as Naylor and Gilman take pains to show, both women suppress their misgivings in order to function within the conjugal parameters determined by their spouses. The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" confesses, "I get so unreasonably angry with John sometimes" (31), while Willa, before her imprisonment, discloses, "Perhaps it was natural to feel that, somehow, she was being unreasonable for thinking she needed more than that. What else could explain his shrinking away, his look of injured bewilderment when she suggested he still wasn't doing enough?" (149). Both women reproach themselves for their immoderate needs, the excessiveness and volatility of their emotions. In both instances, they perceive themselves as "unreasonable," irrational. As a result, they grow suspicious of their intuition, actively colluding with the person they most resent: "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (40). Or as Willa insists, denying kinship with earlier generations of women, similarly victimized: "She wasn't like the other women, she had coped and they were crazy. They never changed. . . . That's why Luther never talked about them: there wasn't a normal one in the bunch. But there was nothing wrong with her" (204). In the end, both Gilman's and Naylor's characters are driven mad, but, even in the midst of it, adhere to the identities and concomitant gender privilege that shackle them. As Gilman slyly reveals of her narrator's squeamishness:

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.

But I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued. (49)

Or as Willa admits, preparing to walk up the stairs and back into Luther's life: "Now, she wanted the name Willa Nedeed. She wanted to walk around and feel that she had a perfect right to respond to a phone call, a letter, an invitation—any verbal or written request directed toward that singular identity" (278).

In both situations, the heroines silence themselves in order to permit their marriages to continue according to established patterns. When John croons

infantilizing nicknames to his spouse, it is to pacify her and prevent her from further verbalizing her dissatisfaction. In the end, it works because she does not want to be unpleasant. Though she comes to resent her husband's presence as intrusive, preventing her from further fixating on the wallpaper, she is secretive and subversive in her scorn, wryly expressing her contempt as she crawls over his prostrate form once he faints from the shock, finally realizing the extent of her psychological deterioration. She can express neither her rage nor her resentment to her spouse because she is so invested in propriety and self-censorship. These can only be channeled into the fierce presence of the once caged inmate of the wallpaper who has found her freedom in the narrator's compliant body and dissociative psyche. It is this persona who has the courage to sneer: "I've got out at last . . . , in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (50). If Jane is, in fact, the narrator and not a misappropriation of Jennie's name, her freedom comes only once she has destroyed her prior identity and claimed a problematic freedom. As a mad woman, she is unencumbered by the stifling decorum and sexist mores of her culture and can finally claim a circumscribed victory over her husband. Her voice and body have been paradoxically liberated by the boundlessness of insanity.

Willa's psychic unraveling takes a disparate form. Rather than stage a rebellion against Luther's oppressive tenets, her revived double becomes their deranged incarnation. Her husband's goal accomplished, he has succeeded in breaking Willa's spirit, preparing her for her unsettling resurrection into faithful wife and birthing canal to the next Luther clone. However, Luther's calculations are off. Thus Willa pushes open the unintentionally unbolted basement door, determinedly stepping out of her crypt and back into Luther's life too soon. Carrying the corpse of their emaciated child, prepared to function as the perfect wife, and obsessed with cleanliness, she is an automaton who fulfills his macabre ambitions with a vengeance:

If she took it a millimeter beyond that, her thoughts would smash the fragility of that singular germ of truth. . . . That action was hers and hers alone. The responsibility did not lie with her mother or father—or Luther. No, she could no longer blame Luther. Willa now marveled at the beauty and simplicity of something so small it had lived unrecognized within her for most of her life. She gained strength and a sense of power from its possession. . . .

Upstairs, she had left an identity that was rightfully hers, that she had worked hard to achieve. Many women wouldn't have chosen it, but she did. With all of its problems, it had given her a measure of security and content-

ment. And she owed no damned apologies to anyone for the last six years of her life. (280)

In emerging from her involuntary captivity, Willa knocks down everything that might obstruct her path to a pristine home, whether candle-laden Christmas tree or Luther himself. As Luther attempts to subdue her, she resists, propelled by her sense of domestic urgency. The house erupts into flames and the bodies of mother, father, and son meld into an unholy union. Tellingly, Willa never reproaches her husband; her only words to him are, "Luther . . . your son is dead" (299). Instead, her misplaced rage is diverted into a superhuman strength that refuses to permit him to once again lock her in the basement, an act that ironically would prevent her from her paramount directive as über-wife.

Like that of Gilman's narrator, Willa's triumph is a contradiction of terms. She has brought an apocalyptic end to the corrupt reign of the Nedeeds, but the cost has been her own psychic and physical annihilation. Perhaps even more alarmingly, while she comes to perceive the horror at the heart of the Nedeed myth, her words, her discoveries, will be forever erased. Although there are stunned spectators to the ensuing events, the larger context has vanished. For Willa, her precursors were quite literally the women caged in the wallpaper who stepped out of their historical confinement to bear witness to her. She, in turn, rejects them. First blaming them for their tragedies and attempting to destroy their effects, she then repacks these belongings in a symbolic reburial. She finally destroys their material history as she prepares to collaborate with Luther to regain her lost status. Willa's is ultimately a tale of denial, including the denial of a resistant voice. While Willa defeats Luther, it is a compromised victory. In fact, it can just as validly be claimed that Luther has brought about his own violent destruction through his unmitigated hubris.

Yet the two texts by Gilman and Naylor create an intriguing dialogue on power, complicity, and the inability to subjugate another without perhaps being crushed in turn. Through the metaphor of marriage, both writers examine social injustice and document its larger toll. However, what does become both increasingly evident and troubling is their complementary query as to who will ultimately bear witness to the events of the past and thereby determine truth. In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," John appears the ultimate arbiter of Jane's fate, her discarded diary to be found by descendants or historians, perhaps hostile, perhaps sympathetic, perhaps indifferent. In the case of *Linden Hills*, however, the definitive legacy of the Nedeeds will most likely be recorded by Daniel Brathwaite, retired scholar and official community historian whose project has been the reembodiment of the past—a

past, as far as he is concerned, that is not only dominated by but indebted to generations of Nedeed men, founders, patriarchs and visionaries. In seizing the word, however, both Naylor and Gilman allow their own audiences to pursue a radically alternative agenda.

NOTES

1. The works of Elizabeth Ammons, Paula Giddings, and Vron Ware provide compelling insights on cross-cultural encounters between black and white women in a variety of nineteenth-century social contexts.

2. Elizabeth Ammons, Hazel Carby, Ann duCille, Paula Giddings, and Claudia Tate, among others, do important scholarly work historicizing the dilemma faced by African American women in relation to claiming greater political unity around racial as opposed to gender classifications.

3. In *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*, edited by Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Naylor explicitly acknowledges her ambivalence toward these movements in several interviews. For instance, in an interview with Matteo Bellinelli, Naylor states:

What we have found out since the Civil Rights Movement is that integration does not work. New York City, for instance, is a classic example of that. What we need to do is some backtracking and begin from the cradle to build self-esteem in our young. We should go grassroots in the community and build up our own organizations. So I believe assimilation can be extremely dangerous. It does not exist in fact in America and to buy into it is to hinder your own psychological health. (108)

In a separate interview with Pearl Cleage, who asks, "Are we in terrible shape, we Black women who are marooned in America," Naylor says,

Yeah, we are. We are in terrible shape and the gap between women like you and I and women like my aunt is growing. It is because we are no longer living in the same places that at one time we did. But then I also see hope because we have indeed survived and slavery was meant to destroy us as a people. We were supposed to come here and work and do our thing and then die off the face of this earth. And the whole Black problem came about because we didn't die off. . . . But to survive is one thing and the quality of your life is something else. (69)

4. See Monika Kaup's *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993), in which she interprets Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in conjunction with Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*.

5. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison contrasts the bourgeoisie to working class blacks: "they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful

funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (68). Thus, the talented tenth adopts the creed of republican motherhood.

6. The motto of the NACW (National Association of Colored Women) was “Lifting As We Climb” (Giddings 97–98).

7. In his *Ornamentalism*, Cannadine writes that he is attempting to subvert Edward Said’s *Orientalism* by revealing how Britain relied on her empire not simply to create an exotic Other that becomes a feminized repository of cultural difference and danger, but by showing how Britain, in fact, used her colonies to reproduce herself abroad (xix, 4), actively nurturing ties to the elite whom British elites viewed as their equals. While there is some validity in the argument, I am less invested in this dimension of *Ornamentalism*’s rhetorical structure (after all, it can easily be argued that there have always existed a limited number of privileged elites to make the administration of empire possible, and these elites have been purchased with pomp, titles, and stolen resources), but the implication that to permit a culture of ornamentation to flourish requires the mobilization of hierarchy, coercion, and violence.

8. Elizabeth Ammons quotes Gilman’s autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, “Her purpose [in writing the story], she explained, ‘was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways’” (39).

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Feminist Humor and Charlotte Perkins Gilman*

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

The exchange was made famous on the cover of *Ms. Magazine* in November 1973. A male comic book character asks, “Do you know the women’s movement has no sense of humor?” A woman replies, “No, but hum a few bars, and I’ll fake it!”¹ More than three decades after that cartoon first appeared, the relationship between feminism and humor is still a contested one. The charge that feminists have no sense of humor still surfaces regularly in the media.² A recent article by Janet Bing in the journal *Women and Language* was titled, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?”³ For Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it most definitely was not. On the contrary, feminist humor was essential to Gilman’s goals as a writer, for she recognized its potential in her campaign to dismantle the absurdly arbitrary gender structures of the status quo. Popular and rather ubiquitous responses to the phrase “feminist humor” often envision humor that is anti-men, or insulting to men, much as popular constructions of feminism itself sometimes characterize it as a movement and vision that is anti-men. But Gilman preferred the term “humanism” to “feminism,” since her larger goal was not the reversal of existing power relations but the demolition of them. She wanted to replace an untenable, inefficient, and arbitrary set of arrangements with ones that made more sense and that allowed both men and women to flourish.

* A version of this essay appeared in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Feminist Engagements: Forays into American Literature and Culture* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009). It is reproduced here by permission.

"Feminist Humor" is not the same as "women's humor," although the terms overlap. Much humor—including much of women's humor—serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and stereotypes. This brand of women's humor may well be cathartic, allowing women to let off steam about frustrations in their lives. But it does not necessarily motivate them to change the conditions that produce the frustrations. I share Mary Douglas's view that any joke is *potentially* subversive, but I believe that feminist humor is subversive by design. It takes as its premise the idea that an androcentric culture organized around an unexamined, naturalized gender hierarchy is an unjust, arbitrary, and inefficient form of social organization that needs to be laughed out of existence.⁴ Not content with being merely cathartic, it is catalytic. Its goal is changing the world. Like a Trojan Horse, humor can get past defenses that block logical argument and didactic sermon. On some level, Gilman recognized that. A part of her writing self understood that once humor gets past those defenses, it can blast through the status quo with speed and staying power.

Gilman always wrote with a purpose. She used every form and genre with which she was familiar to achieve her ends. She produced journalism, sociology, short stories, poetry, literary criticism, psychology, advertising copy, utopian fiction, fables, autobiography, and even a murder mystery. Her goal was always the same: rearrange the social order in ways that allow all human beings—men, women, and children—to thrive. We've become more aware, in recent decades, of her blind spots and limitations—her racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. She had a clear-sighted view of the challenges faced by middle-class white women and a limited understanding of the problems of just about everyone else. At the same time, however, as the obstacles that inspired her to write have shown themselves to be long-lived and challenging decades after her death, we've come to appreciate her fortitude and persistence in using these scattershot methods to try to demolish them. Gilman was known for being a witty and clever speaker.⁵ Yet despite her reputation for skillfully parrying criticism with humor on the lecture platform, humor has not been a salient theme in Gilman criticism.⁶ This essay explores Gilman's feminist humor in some preliminary ways by mapping three of its key tropes and by looking at how other feminist humorists—before and after Gilman—made use of similar strategies. This is just a first step in what I hope will be a productive journey that others will continue.

My underlying assumption is that the goal of Gilman's feminist humor—and that of other writers—is exposing what Mark Twain called, in another context, the "lie of silent assertion"—the silent assertion that there is nothing going on about which intelligent people need be concerned. "Nothing wrong

here,” the lie of silent assertion proclaims. “Everything’s just hunky-dory. The status quo’s just fine. No need to rock the boat or cause a fuss. There isn’t any problem.” Twain came up with the concept of the “lie of silent assertion” to explain people’s willingness to pretend that there’s no problem with an extremely problematical status quo. Specifically, he coined it to explain the lack of an outcry over slavery in the antebellum world of his childhood and the lack of an outcry over anti-Semitism and imperialism in the late 1890s. He lays out this incredibly useful concept in his 1899 essay, “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It.” For Gilman, the lie of silent assertion that needs demolition is the silent assertion that gender roles in our culture are natural, right, and just as they should be. She needs every tool in her writer’s arsenal to blast it to pieces. Humor will prove to be one of the most effective. I’m not going to venture into that Bermuda Triangle of nomenclature that tries to distinguish among wit, satire, sarcasm, comedy, parody, etc. Instead I will focus on three strategies that I’ll refer to as illumination, impersonation, and inversion. I’ll look at how Gilman makes these strategies work for her, and how some other writers used them toward similar ends. I’ll introduce each of these three strategies with an example of visual humor that evokes the literary strategy under discussion.

I. STRATEGY ONE: ILLUMINATION

Picture this scene: a sleep-deprived mother in curlers and bathrobe sits at a breakfast table trying to deal with the temper tantrum of her baby, who has just overturned his cereal bowl. As milk and cereal drip from his high chair, his two slightly older siblings fight with each other at the table. As she copes—just barely—with the escalating chaos in the kitchen, her husband, standing next to the table in a neat business suit, comments blandly, “Well, I’ve got to go to work, even if you don’t.”⁷ This cartoon by Betty Swords illustrates a technique I’ll refer to as “illumination.” “Illumination” involves shining a light on women’s lives, making the invisible visible, breaking through myths and lies that are accepted as truths, and giving voice to truths that are not usually articulated. One myth that needs to give way is the idea that housework is a breeze, women have it easy, and the home is a halcyon haven of peace. Another is the myth that women should aspire to be fashionable by society’s standards and that dress is a proper and admirable obsession for women. Gilman saw the need to blast through these myths, and so did many of her sisters before and after. They all knew that humor could help.

Gilman’s poem “The Housewife,” her story “Through This,” her fable

"The Extinct Angel," and her article "Domestic Economy" all use humor to undo the myth that running a home is both a breeze and a joy and to illuminate the realities that the myth papers over or denies. In "The Housewife," for example, Gilman writes,

Food and the serving of food—that is my daylong care;
What and when we shall eat, what and how we shall wear;
Smiling and cleaning of things—that is my task in the main—
Soil them and clean them and soil them—soil them and clean them again.
(9–12)⁸

The work of the housewife is not supposed to be the stuff of poetry—indeed, it's not supposed to have a light shone on it at all, and Gilman knows that. By including "smiling" on the list of the housewife's main tasks—incongruous, given that these tasks are nothing to smile about—Gilman is taking a jab at the ideology that says that married women are ecstatically happy all the time.⁹ Gilman is illuminating the tedium of the housewife's life not only because she takes seriously the quotidian challenges of that world, but because she wants to abolish that world by professionalizing housework and giving women more options. She does this not because she has a simple *idée fixe* about how society ought to be organized but because of what all that tedious housework does to women's minds:

My mind is trodden in circles, tiresome, narrow and hard.
Useful, commonplace, private—simply a small back-yard;
And I the Mother of Nations!—Blind their struggle and vain!—
I cover the earth with my children—each with a housewife's brain. ("Housewife" 17–20)

In her determination to link "kitchen-mindedness" with the fate of the world, Gilman goes further than many of the domestic humorists of the 1950s who drew humor from delineating the dull world of the housewife to get a knowing, conspiratorial laugh from women readers. I'm thinking of a figure like Phyllis McGinley, who wrote, "Some lives are filled with sorrow and woe / And some with joys ethereal. / But the days may come and the weeks may go, / My life is filled with cereal" (1–4; qtd. in Walker 98). For McGinley, that closing rhyme is the last stop on the line; for Gilman it would be just the start of the journey.

Gilman's story "Through This" deconstructs the myth of a housewife's blissful and purpose-filled life by giving us the stream-of-consciousness inte-

rior monologue of a young wife and mother who has thoroughly bought into the myth but whose mediations (meditations?) on it are constantly interrupted by some new domestic chore or challenge:

A new day.

With the great sunrise great thoughts come.

I rise with the world. I live, I can help. Here close at hand lie the sweet home duties through which my life shall touch the others! Through this man made happier and stronger by my living; through these rosy babies sleeping here in the growing light; through this small, sweet, well-ordered home, whose restful influence shall touch all comers; through me too, perhaps—there's the baker, I must get up, or this bright purpose fades. . . .

John likes morning-glories on the breakfast table—scented flowers are better with lighter meals. All is ready—healthful, dainty, delicious. . . .

Through this dear work, well done, I shall reach, I shall help—but I must get the dishes done and not dream. . . .

Now to soak the tapioca. Now the beets on, they take so long. I'll bake the potatoes—they don't go in yet. Now babykins must have her bath and nap.

A clean hour and a half before dinner. I can get those little nightgowns cut and basted. . . .

. . . This is my work. Through this, in time—there's the bell again, and it waked the baby! (194–95)

The woman in this piece is constantly on the verge of articulating the great, grand purpose in which she participates by carrying out all these tasks, but the press of her “to do” list usually gets in the way before she can finish her thought.¹⁰

Gilman's amusing fable “An Extinct Angel” humorously tackles the myth of the “angel in the house” directly.

There once was a species of angel inhabiting this planet, acting as “a universal solvent” to all the jarring, irreconcilable elements of human life. . . . [A]lmost every family had one. . . .

It was the business of the angel to assuage, to soothe, to comfort, to delight. No matter how unruly were the passions of the owner, sometimes even to the extent of legally beating his angel with “a stick no thicker than his thumb,” the angel was to have no passion whatever—unless self-sacrifice may be called a passion, and indeed it often amounted to one with her.

The human creature went out to his daily toil and comforted himself as

he saw fit. He was apt to come home tired and cross, and in this exigency it was the business of the angel to wear a smile for his benefit—a soft, perennial, heavenly smile.

By an unfortunate limitation of humanity the angel was required, in addition to such celestial duties as smiling and soothing, to do kitchen service, cleaning, sewing, nursing, and other mundane tasks. But these things must be accomplished without the slightest diminution of the angelic virtues. . . .

The amount of physical labor of a severe and degrading sort required of one of these bright spirits, was amazing. . . .

Yes, it does seem strange to this enlightened age; but the fact was that the angels waited on the human creatures in every form of menial service, doing things as their natural duty which the human creature loathed and scorned.

It does seem irreconcilable, but they reconciled it. The angel was an angel and the work was the angel's work and what more do you want?

There is one thing about the subject which looks a bit suspicious: The angels—I say it under breath—were not very bright!

The human creatures did not like intelligent angels—intelligence seemed to dim their shine, somehow, and pale their virtues. It was harder to reconcile things where the angels had any sense. Therefore every possible care was taken to prevent the angels from learning anything of our gross human wisdom.

But little by little, owing to the unthought-of consequences of repeated intermarriage between the angel and the human being, the angel longed for, found and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge.

And in that day she surely died.

The species is now extinct. . . . (163–65)

Here Gilman advances the notion that "the human being" was implicitly male, while the gender of the now-extinct "angel" was implicitly female—a move that rather playfully echoes arguments she makes in *Man-Made World*. Her readers would clearly recognize the angel as the familiar "angel in the house"—a Victorian ideal that, in Gilman's view, deserved to be killed. By imagining the creature as currently extinct, Gilman is crafting a whimsical piece of science fiction that comments rather acidly on what is still a very current state of affairs. And by making the "angel" "not very bright," Gilman makes sure that any reader who failed to question the appeal of that ideal will hesitate to identify with it after reading this sketch.

"The Housewife," "Through This," and "An Extinct Angel" tackle the tedium of the work of the wife and mother and the mandatory smiles that

were required as part of the job (the smiles were proof that she didn't think that these dull and daunting tasks constituted "work"). Gilman's article titled "Domestic Economy" took a different tack, also using humor, to challenge the rationality of lumping so many tasks together in the home. Gilman writes,

What is commonly called "housekeeping" really embraces [a] group of industries, arbitrarily connected by custom, but in their nature not only diverse, but grossly incompatible. . . .

As separate businesses we can plainly see their incompatibility. No man advertises a "Restaurant and Laundry," or "Bakery and Bath-house"—the association of fresh food and soiled linen or unclean bodies would not be pleasant to our minds. Neither should we patronize a "Kindergarten and Carpet Cleaning Establishment" or "Primary School and Dressmaking Parlor." . . . In the care of the sick, for their sakes as well as other interests involved, we isolate them as far as possible; a hospital naturally striving for quiet and cleanliness.

Yet we carry on all these contradictory trades in one building, and also live in it!

Not only do we undertake to have all these labors performed in one house, but by one person.

In full ninety per cent of our American homes there is but one acting functionary to perform these varied and totally dissimilar functions—to be cook, laundress, chambermaid, charwoman, seamstress, nurse and governess. (158–59)

The absurdity of these incongruous juxtapositions dramatizes the absurdly incongruous set of tasks that every housewife and mother is required to perform on a daily basis. (In Gilman's novel *What Diantha Did*, Diantha will put a price tag on these various services and present her stunned father with an invoice; his payment will bankroll the take-out catering service she creates.) Gilman's effort to break down housekeeping into its component parts looks ahead to the wages-for-housework movement of the 1970s (and the articles that periodically have surfaced in women's magazines ever since) that focused on housekeeping not as some divine calling, but as work—hard work, draining work, complicated and exhausting work.¹¹ I haven't yet found any evidence of Gilman's being aware of her great-aunt Catherine's student, Sarah Willis, once a star pupil at Beecher's academy in Hartford, who used humor to make the same point half a century earlier in her 1851 column "Aunt Hetty on Matrimony," and elsewhere. Sarah Willis, writing

under the pseudonym Fanny Fern and speaking in the persona of "Aunt Hetty," evokes the tasks required of a wife and mother with acerbic wit and humor that reels into flat exhaustion, culminating in the warning, "O, girls! Set your affections on cats, poodles, parrots or lap dogs; but let matrimony alone. It's the hardest way on earth of getting a living. You never know when your work is done" ("Aunt" 1961). It is a comment Mary Kay Blakeley would echo in 1980: "The job description of mother is clearly in need of revision. As it stands, the shifts are twenty-four hours, for a period of approximately 1,825 consecutive days. The benefits are in sore need of amendment: no vacations, no sick leave, no lunch hours, no breaks. Moreover, it is the only unpaid position I know of that can result in arrest if you fail to show up for work" (62). The same spirit animates the mid-century cartoon by Betty Swords with which this section begins.

While Blakeley focuses on the myth of motherhood as not being "work," Helen Rowland debunks the myth of housework not being "work" in a 1927 column titled "Man's Sweet Dream":

To a man, the great mystery of life, is "what a woman does with her time, all day!"

In his blithe philosophy, all she need do, is to press a button—and presto! The house starts running itself, and goes right on running. . . .

. . . Clothes pick themselves up off the floor and hop gaily into the laundry hamper or back on to the closet hooks.

Shoes whistle to each other, choose their partners and do a fox trot onto the shoerack.

Dishes leave the table at a signal, plunge merrily into the dishpan, and then give themselves a hot shower and a rub-down before filing into places on the shelves. . . .

The butcher psycho-analyzes the family and discovers its suppressed desires—and lo, the leg of lamb comes stalking up to the kitchen door all covered with mint sauce. . . .

Washing machines never break down, . . . telephones never interrupt, . . . babies never cry—water runs up hill, the moon is made of green cheese—

And *housekeeping* is one long day of rest!

What *does* a woman do with her time all day? (254–55)

Or, as Erma Bombeck put it, "Housework is a treadmill from futility to oblivion with stop offs at tedium and counter productivity."¹² And we call her a humorist?! Yet comments on housework and motherhood like those

of Fanny Fern, Mary Kay Blakely, Helen Rowland, and Erma Bombeck are funny because they illuminate what is meant to remain dark: they voice what was supposed to be unsaid, replacing the ubiquitous myth of the housewife's domestic tranquility with the ubiquitous reality of tedious, sometimes mind-numbing, repetitive hard work.

Dress is another key area in which humor can help illuminate truths that social custom keeps hidden. Gilman would have appreciated Betsy Salkind's comment, "Men's clothes are so much more comfortable than women's. Take their shoes—they've got room for five toes—in each shoe" (qtd. in Kaufman 74). Gilman often challenged the assumption that being dressed fashionably by society's standards was a proper and admirable obsession for women. In *With Her in Ourland*, for example, Ellador asks Van whether women ever dressed more foolishly than they do now. Van thinks about how to respond as follows:

I ran over in my mind some of the eccentricities of fashion in earlier periods and was about to say that it was possible when I chanced to look out the window. It was a hot day, most oppressively hot, with a fiercely glaring sun. A woman stood just across the street talking to a man. I picked up my opera glass and studied her for a moment. . . . She stood awkwardly in extremely high-heeled slippers, in which the sole of the foot leaned on a steep slant from heel to ball, and her toes, poor things, were driven into the narrow-pointed toe of the slipper by the whole sliding weight of the body above. . . .

But what struck me the most was that she wore about her neck a dead fox or the whole outside of one.

No, she was not a lunatic. No, that man was not her keeper. No, it was not a punishment, not an initiation penalty, not an election bet.

That woman, of her own free will and at considerable expense, wore heavy furs in the hottest summer weather.

I laid down the glass and turned to Ellador. "No, my dear," said I gloomily. "It is not possible that women ever could have been more idiotic in dress than that." (175–76)¹³

Van's description of the woman's dress underlines the fact that fashion can be a cruel taskmaster, inflicting gratuitous pain and discomfort; in Van's view, and Gilman's, no rational justification for inflicting such pain and discomfort on oneself could possibly exist. Or take Gilman's poem, "The Cripple":

There are such things as feet, human feet,
But these she does not use;

Firm and supple, white and sweet,
Softly graceful, lightly fleet,
For comfort, beauty, service meet—
These are feet, human feet,
These she doth with scorn refuse—
Preferring shoes.

There are such things as shoes, human shoes,
Though scant and rare the proof;
Serviceable, soft and strong,
Pleasant, comely, wearing long,
Easy as a well known song—
These are shoes, human shoes.
But from these she holds aloof—
Prefers the hoof!

There are such things as hoofs, sub-human hoofs,
High-heeled sharp anomalies
Small and pinching, hard and black,
Shiny as a beetle's back,
Cloven, clattering on the track,
These are hoofs, sub-human hoofs,
She cares not for truth, nor ease—
Preferring these! (1–24)

Here Gilman uses humor to illuminate a truth that wasn't meant to be recognized: that when women are cast as ornaments, when their clothing is designed for its form rather than its function, the result is unnatural and unhealthy (which is the same conclusion Van reached in *With Her in Ourland*). She makes a similar move in "A Protest against Petticoats," in which a little girl plaintively asks,

Why must my dress be fine?
While brother goes
In knicks and hose,
Why are these ruffles mine? . . .

.....

His cap is easy on his head,
Alert and free his face—

Why must I wear
O'er eyes and hair
This cauliflower of lace? (12–15, 21–25)

Elsewhere she ridicules women's dress as, if not unhealthy, simply having no reason to exist. In her poem "Her Hat Still with Us," for example, she writes,

So big, so black—so shapeless, so oppressive,
So heavy, overhanging and excessive,
Huge shadowy, bulk—a bier? a bush? no, worse
A cross between a haystack and a hearse. (1–4)

And Gilman goes after hats, shoes, *and* skirts in the poem "This Is a Lady's Hat," subtitled "A Trio of Triolets":

This is a lady's hat—
To cover the seat of reason;
It may look like a rabbit or bat,
Yet this is a lady's hat;
May be ugly, ridiculous, that
We never remark, 'twould be treason.
This is a lady's hat,
To cover the seat of reason.

* * *

These are a lady's shoes,
Ornaments, curved and bended,
But feet are given to use,
Not merely to show off shoes,
To stand, walk, run if we choose,
For which these were never intended.
These are a lady's shoes.
Ornaments, curved and bended.

* * *

This is a lady's skirt,
Which limits her locomotion;
Her shape is so smooth-begirt
As to occupy all the skirt,
Of being swift and alert

She has not the slightest notion;
This is a lady's skirt,
Which limits her locomotion. (1-24)

While in this poem Gilman shines a light on all the sacrifices women are required to make in their desire to dress fashionably, women are not the only ones whose choices in dress come in for ridicule. Gilman takes on the form-over-function idiocy when she encounters it in men, as well. She wrote in *The Forerunner*, for example, that "[o]ne modern necessity of gentleman's dress which rests on symbolism alone is starch. . . . Starch is not beautiful. To clothe a human figure, or any part of it, in a still glittering white substance, is in direct contradiction to the lines and action of the body. One might as well hang a dinner-plate across his chest, as the glaring frontlet so beloved of the masculine heart" (*Dress* 12). But although she occasionally shines a light on the silliness and hypocrisy of men's dress, women's dress is a much more frequent target. The issue of fashion and its function is central to one of my favorite Gilman stories, "If I Were a Man," where Molly Matthewson's discovery of the wonder of *pockets* comes as a revelation. Pockets are *still* a distant dream for women in 1991 when *In Stitches* comes out, and Cheri Kramare and Paula Treichler are quoted as saying, "Pocket Envy is women's unfulfilled yearning for practical clothes." At the international Gilman conference in 1997, I described the annual "pocket survey" I give my class when I teach "If I Were a Man." Male and female students counted the pockets in the clothing they were wearing and I then took a pocket census and came up with the average number of pockets for each gender. Men were always ahead. Well, more than ten years later, I'm still conducting the survey, and men still come out ahead. The gap has narrowed very slightly, but women's clothing still follows form while men's clothing follows function, and pockets in women's clothing remain for most of us, most of the time, a cruel chimera. One year after Gilman's "If I Were a Man" came out in *Physical Culture*, by the way, the inimitable Alice Duer Miller published a book titled *Are Women People? A Book of Rhymes for Suffrage Times* that included the witty piece called "Why We Oppose Pockets for Men."¹⁴ At one of the earlier international Gilman conferences, I had the chance to chat with Gilman's great-granddaughter, who works as a clothing designer for a prominent ready-to-wear dress manufacturer. I asked her whether she put pockets in the dresses she designed. Yes, she sighed. She did. But her superiors usually made her take them out. No doubt this state of affairs would have inspired Gilman to write an irreverent, funny poem—for the absurdities of what women were expected to wear deserved to be laughed into oblivion.

II. STRATEGY TWO: IMPERSONATION

A comic strip by Nicole Hollander features a rather self-satisfied looking man sitting on a barstool at a bar in front of a fancy drink announcing his opinions. At the other end of the bar, as the third frame in the strip shows us, sits the redoubtable Sylvia, flipping through a magazine, half listening, looking bored. She lets him have his say—but after he finishes his second sentence (or thinks he has), she finishes it for him with a twist:

[First frame] Man: “Equal rights for women is unnatural.”

[Second frame] Man: “What is natural . . . ”

[Third Frame] Man: “—is men wanting to protect women.”

Sylvia: “From earning too much money.”¹⁵

The humor works in part because Hollander has allowed the man to sound just as he might have sounded. She knows her readers have heard men like him make comments like that often.

Impersonating the voice of the person who holds attitudes you want your reader to reject is a dependable staple in the satirist’s bag of tricks. Mark Twain found it useful, for example, to impersonate the voice of a racist newspaper editorialist in two of his satires on the treatment of the Chinese in San Francisco, “What Have the Police Been Doing?” (1865) and “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy” (1870). He impersonated the voice of southern gentlemen in favor of lynchings in his 1869 satire titled “Only a ‘Nigger.’” And, of course, he crafted the voice of an ignorant and repulsive white racist when he created the character of Pap Finn in 1885.¹⁶ Paul Laurence Dunbar, a contemporary of Twain’s and Gilman’s, deftly evoked the hypocrisy of a racist white politician in the speeches he gave the white lawyer in a story he published in 1900 called “One Man’s Fortunes.”¹⁷ Impersonating the enemy has been a staple of feminist humor, as well, and a strategy that Gilman sometimes found useful. One example is a poem she published in *The Fore-runner* in 1913 titled “The Head of the Board”:

Abraham Stern, of the New York Schools,
Is not to be classed among knaves or fools
But stands with the Wise, the Strong, the Good,
In defense of Sacred Motherhood.

Motherhood is so holy pure,
That no true mother could endure

To rob her child of reverent care
By teaching others anywhere.

.....

As far as Abraham's arm can reach
Mothers shall not be allowed to teach,
Nor teachers to wed—as others should—
Oh Grand Defender of Motherhood!

Besides his duty to shield the mother,
This gallant champion holds another,
From being corrupted, debased, defiled,
Abraham's arm must save the child.

Guard it from that familiar sight
Which at home is sacred, noble, right—
Can children bear—without shame—who could?
The sight or knowledge of motherhood.

Honor to Abraham, standing fast,
Fond champion of our dying past,
And Pity—even now one hears
The Future's universal jeers. (1–8, 13–28)

What a useful strategy impersonating the enemy is to ridicule the arbitrary and hypocritical rationales that constrict women's options in society. Alice Duer Miller employed it in a similar way in a 1915 poem called "The Gallant Sex." The poem is preceded by an explanatory note that says, "A woman engineer has been dismissed by the Board of Education, under their new rule that women shall not attend high pressure boilers, although her work has been satisfactory and she holds a license to attend such boilers from the Police Department" (Miller, "Gallant" 206). The poem then reads as follows:

Lady, dangers lurk in boilers,
Risks I could not let you face.
Men were meant to be the toilers,
Home, you know, is women's place.
Have no home? Well, is that so?
Still, it's not my fault, you know.

Charming lady, work no more:
Fair you are and sweet as honey;
Work might make your fingers sore;
And, besides, I need the money.
Prithee rest,—or starve or rob—
Only let me have your job! (1–12)

Half a century before Gilman and Miller, however, Fanny Fern had published a triumph of parodic impersonation of a sexist male when she wrote the most misogynistic, obnoxiously prejudiced review of her own book that she could imagine:

We imagine her, from her writings, to be a muscular, black-browed, grenadier-looking female, who would be more at home in a boxing gallery than in a parlor,—a vociferous, demonstrative, strong-minded horror,—a woman only by virtue of her dress. . . . When we take up a woman's book we expect to find gentleness, timidity, and that lovely reliance on the patronage of our sex which constitutes a woman's greatest charm. . . . How much more womanly to have allowed herself to be doubled up by adversity, and quietly laid away on the shelf of fate, than to have rolled up her sleeves, and gone to fisticuffs with it. (Fern, "Fresh" 290–91)

Perhaps she bet on the fact that she had just preemptively topped anything nasty a reviewer of this ilk might want to say about her, thereby stealing his thunder—and his material.

While impersonating male sexists has been a perennially fruitful project for feminists like Fern, Gilman, and Miller, Gilman dared to take impersonation to a different level by impersonating the voices of anti-feminist women. This approach is central to the effectiveness of "The Unnatural Mother." In this piece, the City Boarder is introduced to the eponymous, now-deceased "Unnatural Mother," Esther Greenwood, through the comments made about her by three older women of the village, "old Mis' Briggs," Susannah Jacobs, and Martha Ann Simmons, all of whom disapprove of her heartily, and by "the Youngest Briggs girl," Maria 'Melia. Old Mis' Briggs opines, "'No mother that was a mother would desert her own child for anything on earth!' . . . 'I should think,' piped little Martha Ann Simmons, the village dressmaker, 'that she might 'a saved her young one first and then tried what she could do for the town.' . . . 'She was an unnatural mother,' repeated Miss Jacobs harshly, 'as I said to begin with'" (Gilman, "Unnatural" 57). When she was growing up, Esther's widowed father let her roam the country without shoes,

dressed in comfortable clothes. Gilman writes, "'You should have seen the way he dressed that child!' pursued Miss Jacobs. 'It was a reproach to the town. Why, you couldn't tell at a distance whether it was a boy or a girl. And barefoot! He let that child go barefoot till she was so big I was actually mortified to see her.'" Gilman tells us that Esther's "wild, healthy childhood" had made her different "in her early womanhood from the meek, well-behaved damsels of the little place. She was well enough liked by those who knew her at all, and the children of the place adored her, but the worthy matrons shook their heads and prophesied no good of a girl who was 'queer'" (59). Maria Amelia sticks up for Esther only to incur her mother's fury:

"I think she was a real nice girl," said Maria Amelia. . . . "She was so nice to us children. . . . She'd take us berrying and on all sorts of walks, and teach us new games and tell us things. I don't remember anyone that ever did us the good she did." Maria Amelia's thin chest heaved with emotion, and there were tears in her eyes; but her mother took her up somewhat sharply.

"That sounds well I must say—right before your own mother that's toiled and slaved for you!" (60)

The old women of the town hate Esther because she preferred outdoor games with the children to running after beaux, because her father had "actually taught his daughter how babies come," because she never learned housekeeping—and most of all because she put the welfare of the entire town above her own life and that of her children when the dam burst and she had to make a choice between saving herself and her children or saving the entire town. Never mind that they owe their lives to her. Never mind that many of the children for whom they knitted endless lace booties and dressed in fancy clothes and kept confined indoors lie in the graveyard—they know how mothers ought to behave. Esther broke the rules. Here Gilman deftly gets inside the heads of a group of women who are blind to the reality that if Esther *had* been a "natural mother" by their lights, if she had internalized the rules by which *they* lived, none of them would be there to tell the tale. There is quiet, chilling humor in Gilman's capable ventriloquist performance.

Gilman impersonates the voice of an anti-feminist woman once again in her poem "A Conservative," but with a lighter, more fanciful touch.

The garden beds I wandered by
One bright and cheerful morn,
When I found a new-fledged butterfly,
A-sitting on a thorn,

A black and crimson butterfly,
All doleful and forlorn.

I thought that life could have no sting
To infant butterflies,
So I gazed on this unhappy thing
With wonder and surprise,
While sadly with his waving wing
He wiped his weeping eyes.

Said I, "What can the matter be?
Why weepest thou so sore?
With garden fair and sunlight free
And flowers in goodly store:"—
But he only turned away from me
And burst into a roar.

Cried he, "My legs are thin and few
Where once I had a swarm!
Soft fuzzy fur—a joy to view—
Once kept my body warm,
Before these flapping wing-things grew,
To hamper and deform!"

At that outrageous bug I shot
The fury of mine eye;
Said I, in scorn all burning hot,
In rage and anger high,
"You ignominious idiot!
Those wings are made to fly!"

"I do not want to fly," said he,
"I only want to squirm!"
And he drooped his wings dejectedly,
But still his voice was firm:
"I do not want to be a fly!
I want to be a worm!"

O yesterday of unknown lack!

To-day of unknown bliss!
I left my fool in red and black,
The last I saw was this,—
The creature madly climbing back
Into his chrysalis. (1–42)

Did Gilman have anti-suffrage women in mind when she wrote this fanciful poem? A poem like this demonstrates Gilman's recognition that whimsical humor, just as much as dry sarcasm, had its role to play in the struggle.

III. STRATEGY THREE: INVERSION

The scene is unremarkable: a man and woman are speaking to one another at a suburban cocktail party. But it is the woman who addresses this question to the man: "and who were you before you were married?"¹⁸ This cartoon by Martha Campbell employs the strategy that I'm calling "inversion." Inversion involves imagining how men would feel if they found themselves in women's bodies and clothes and roles, and how women would feel if they found themselves in men's bodies and clothes and roles. Gilman casts men in the position of women in her article "What Do Men Think of Women?" and in her discussion of the house-husband in *The Home*, and she gives a woman the chance to feel what it would be like to be in the position—and clothing—of a man in her story "If I Were a Man." In her article "What Do Men Think of Women?" in *The Forerunner*, Gilman asks,

Suppose that women were the great bankers and financiers of Wall Street, ponderous creatures holding the financial fate of the nation in their hands (or trying to) and that the men of Wall Street were only a flood of chattering boy stenographers. . . . What would women think of men? . . . Or suppose that men wore costumes of such contemptible sort as to hamper them completely; shoes with deforming heels which would not allow them to stand or walk in comfort, much less run; trousers of such make that they could not take a free step and had to be helped about like cripples; hats which drowned face and head in irregular huge masses of velvet and feathers, robbing humanity of all dignity and intellect, . . . —what would women think of men then? Could a woman respect a man with his hat brim resting on his shoulders, his legs tied together, his body shaped this way and that from year to year according to his corsets—. . . ? (15–16)

In *The Home: Its Work and Its Influence*, Gilman continues to explore this strategy of inversion, writing, “Suppose we change the sex and consider for a while the status of a house-husband.” The house-husband, totally devoted to his family,

goes forth to the hunt, brave, subtle, fiercely ingenious; and, actuated by his ceaseless love for his family he performs wonders. He brings home the food—day after day—even sometimes enough for several days, though meat does not keep very long. . . . But try to point out to the house-husband what other things he could obtain for [his family], create for them, provide for them, if he learned to combine with other men, to exchange labour, to organize industry. See his virtuous horror!

What! Give up his duty to his family! Let another man hunt for them! . . . He will not hear of it. . . . Strong in this conviction, the house-husband would remain intrenched [*sic*] in his home, serving his family with might and main, having no time, no strength, no brain capacity for understanding larger methods; and there he and his family would all be, immovable in the Stone age.

Never was any such idiot on earth as this hypothetical house-husband. (98–100).

Thus Gilman uses humorous gender inversion to argue that the requirement that women adhere to fashion in their dress interferes with their being respected and taken seriously as members of the human community; and she uses it to suggest that the opposition to women’s joining forces with others to put food on their family’s table and accomplish other household tasks with greater efficiency is absurd.

Gilman’s story “If I Were a Man” allows Molly Matthewson to inhabit her husband’s body and clothes for a day while keeping her own mind. The result is a revelation—not just about pockets, but about shoes, mobility, comfort, efficiency and a general sense of being at home in the world. Molly’s surprise at all of these new sensations reminds readers in graphic, visceral ways of all that women lose by conforming to the social and cultural norms that confine them to unjustly narrow and constricted ways of life. All of these pieces are humorous, to varying degrees, and the humor stems from the inversion of gender roles (32–38). Once again, Fanny Fern tried this half a century before Gilman did in her column called “The Model Husband,” which revealed a great deal of what was expected of the “model wife.” In the late twentieth century, Judy Syfers reprises this strategy in her essay titled “I Want a Wife.” And Alice Kahn, in “My Life as a Man,” does a very similar

riff when she writes, "I can't make it in this man's world. Life would be so much easier if I had a wife" (133).

Writers from Alice Duer Miller to Mark Twain to Gloria Steinem have all explored the humorous strategy of imagining what it would be like if men were treated as women are. Miller demonstrates how it would sound if men were subjected to the same anti-suffrage arguments that women were in "Why We Oppose Votes for Men."

1. Because man's place is in the armory.
2. Because no really manly man wants to settle any question other than by fighting about it.
3. Because if men should adopt peaceable methods women will no longer look up to them.
4. Because men will lose their charm if they step out of their natural sphere and interest themselves in other matters than feats of arms, uniform, and drums.
5. Because men are too emotional to vote. Their conduct at baseball games and political conventions shows this, while their innate tendency to appeal to force renders them peculiarly unfit for the task of government. (*Are* 50)

In a wild farce Mark Twain wrote in 1898 titled *Is He Dead? A Comedy in Three Acts*, circumstances require that France's greatest painter, Jean François Millet, pretend to be his widowed sister for two acts. In the process, the limitations that social customs place on women are seen in a new light—from dress that confines women's movement to social norms that discourage women from expressing eloquence or outrage. But for what is probably the most celebrated instance of comic gender reversal, we would turn to Gloria Steinem's brilliant critique of the arbitrariness of male power, the essay "If Men Could Menstruate," a topsy-turvy romp through the halls of power. Alas, only a tiny sample of her prose will have to suffice:

Military men, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation ("men-struation") as proof that only men could serve in the Army ("you have to give blood to take blood"), [or] occupy political office ("can women be aggressive without that steadfast cycle governed by the planet Mars?"). . . . Of course, male intellectuals would offer the most moral and logical arguments. How could a woman master any discipline that demanded a sense of time, space, mathematics, or measurement, for instance, without that in-built gift for measuring the cycles of the moon and planets? . . . In the rarefied fields of philosophy and religion, could women

compensate for missing the rhythm of the universe? Or for their lack of symbolic death-and-resurrection every month?

“In fact, if men could menstruate,” Steinem concludes, “the power justifications could probably go on forever. If we let them” (25–26).

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, then, Gilman often used humor to dramatize the absurdities of “our androcentric world.” Three strategies that she found useful—illumination, impersonation, and inversion—were all used by Fanny Fern before her, and by a host of feminist humorists who came after her. Humor appealed to these women because of its catalytic possibilities—its potential power to challenge familiar patterns of thought, to spark new insights and understandings. As Mark Twain once wrote, “Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand” (“Chronicle” 165).

But Gilman’s feminist humor rarely produces the kind of laughter Twain has in mind. When it works, it makes us smile—or wince. Something else Twain said might help us understand why. “Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach,” he observed, “but it must do both if it would live forever” (*Mark Twain in Eruption* 202). Gilman was a teacher and preacher first. Her humor was always part of the lesson, part of the sermon. The preaching and teaching came more easily to her than the humor. But maybe all feminist humor by definition aims to teach and preach. Maybe rather than blowing “a colossal humbug” to “rags and atoms at a blast,” feminist humor tries to wear it away more gradually, as the feminist stand-up comic Kate Clinton suggests:

Consider feminist humor and consider the lichen. Growing low and slowly on enormous rocks, secreting tiny amounts of acid, year after year, eating into the rock. Making places for water to gather, to freeze and crack the rock a bit. Making soil, making way for grasses to grow. Making way for rosehips and sea oats, for aspen and cedar. It is the lichen which begins the splitting apart of the rocks, the changing of the shoreline, the shape of the earth. Feminist humor is serious, and it is about the changing of this world. (Clinton 147)

Gilman wanted to change the world one mind at a time. She was well aware of the huge social and political obstacles that blocked the road to change. But as her whimsical, self-mocking 1890 poem, "An Obstacle," shows us, she also appreciated the ways in which a change in human consciousness could rob those obstacles of their power:

I was climbing up a mountain path
 With many things to do.
Important business of my own,
 And other people's too.
When I ran against a Prejudice
 That quite cut off the view.

My work was such as could not wait,
 My path quite clearly showed,
My strength and time were limited,
 I carried quite a load;
And there that hulking Prejudice
 Sat all across the road.

So I spoke to him politely,
 For he was huge and high,
And begged that he would move a bit
 And let me travel by.
He smiled, but as for moving!—
 He didn't even try.

And then I reasoned quietly
 With that colossal mule:
My time was short—no other path
 The mountain winds were cool
I argued like a Solomon;
 He sat there like a fool.

Then I flew into a passion,
 I danced and howled and swore.
I pelted and belabored him
 Till I was stiff and sore.
He got as mad as I did
 But he sat there as before.

.....

So I sat before him helpless,
In an ecstasy of woe—
The mountain mists were rising fast
The sun was sinking slow—
When a sudden inspiration came,
As sudden winds do blow.

I took my hat, I took my stick,
My load I settled fair,
I approached that awful incubus
With an absent-minded air—
And I walked directly through him,
As if he wasn't there. (1–30, 37–48)

I love that image of a huge, hulking Prejudice blocking her path, and Gilman speaking politely first, reasoning, then arguing, then flying into a passion, dancing, howling, swearing in fury, pelting and belaboring him—and then, in an inspiration, pushing ahead and finding that he had no staying power at all. I like this poem for reminding us that, for all the teaching and preaching, Gilman could also laugh at herself—at her fixed ideas of how to fix the world. Gilman wanted to change the world one mind at a time. But sometimes, this poem suggests, she suspected that the mind that needed changing might just be her own.

NOTES

1. Cover, *Ms. Magazine*, Nov. 1973. Perhaps the most succinct and useful explanation of women's alleged deficiency when it comes to a sense of humor is Lisa Merrill's comment that "women's so-called 'lack of humor' is, in fact, a refusal to comply with the *premise* of a joke" (273). Or, as feminist cartoonist Betty Swords put it, "Women don't make the jokes because they are the joke" (65).

2. See, for example, Mike Adams, "Why I Don't Take Feminists Seriously, Part II." Townhall.com, 25 Jan. 2006. Web. 10 July 2010. http://townhall.com/columnists/Mike-Adams/2006/01/25/why_i_dont_take_feminists_seriously_part_ii.

3. Bing argues against a definition of feminist humor that "frames males as oppressors and females as victims" in favor of one that "celebrates the values and perspectives of feminist women" (22).

4. Another way of describing this process is, to borrow Judy Little's phrase, "saturizing the norm." Carol Farley Kessler invokes Little in her essay on Gilman's light verse, writing, "The light tone of [Gilman's early] verse I take to be a strategic calculation to disarm. In keeping with the contemporary authors Judy Little has examined, Gilman too attacks through satire, sarcasm, or scorn the traditions that are considered basic to social functioning: she 'satirizes the norm'" (140).

5. In her autobiography, as Kessler reminds us, Gilman noted, "Audiences are always better pleased with a smart retort, some joke or epigram, than with any amount of reasoning. In the discussion after a Forum lecture in Boston, an address on some aspect of the Woman Question, a man in the gallery, who evidently took exception to a dull rose fillet I wore in my hair, demanded to know how women could expect to equal men 'so long as they took so much time fixing up their hair and putting ribbons in it?'" There was some commotion, cries of 'Put him out!' but I grinned up at him cheerfully and replied, 'I do not think it has been yet established whether it takes a woman longer to do her hair than it does a man to shave.' This was not an answer at all, but it seemed to please every one but the inquirer" (Gilman, *Living* 328; qtd. in Kessler 133). For a useful discussion of the complexity of women's humor, see Walker, particularly chapter 5, "Feminist Humor" 139–67; and June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991). See also the introductions accompanying the three leading anthologies of feminist humor, Deanne Stillman and Anne Beatts, eds., *Tit-ters: The First Collection of Humor by Women* (New York: Collier, 1978); Kaufman and Blakeley; and Kaufman. See also Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991) and Merril. For an illuminating comparative examination of humor focused on domesticity by women and by men, see Gregg Camfield, *Necessary Madness: The Humor of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

6. The one exception to the trend of ignoring Gilman's use of humor is Carol Farley Kessler's essay, "Brittle Jars and Bitter Jangles," which originally appeared in *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 4 (1979): 35–43 and was reprinted ten years later in Sheryl L. Meyering, ed., *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989). Kessler focuses on light verse from *In This Our World* (1895), noting that it is "often not funny at all, but rather satiric, sarcastic, even sardonic" (133).

7. Betty Swords cartoon (Kaufman and Blakeley 123). For more on Swords's achievements as a feminist cartoonist, see Swords ("Why") and Nancy A. Walker, "Talking Back to the Culture: Contemporary Women's Comic Art," *New Directions in American Humor*, ed. David E. E. Sloane (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 103–17.

8. This poem was originally published in *The Forerunner* 1 (Sept. 1910): 18 and then *Suffrage Songs and Verses* (New York: Charlton, 1911: 8–9). For more on the tradition of women humorists' focus on the housewife, see Zita Z. Dressner, "Domestic Comic Writers," *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 93–114.

9. This is the same move that Fanny Fern made fifty years earlier in her column

“The Tear of a Wife,” which closes like this:

what have you got to cry for? A-i-n-t y-o-u m-a-r-r-i-e-d? Isn't that the sum-mum bonum,—the height of feminine ambition? You can't get beyond that! It is the jumping off place! You've arriv!—got to the end of your journey! Stage puts up there! You have nothing to do but retire on your laurels, and spend the rest of your life endeavoring to be thankful that you are Mrs. John Smith! “Smile!” you simpleton! (“Tear” 1964)

10. That “to do” list resonates, as well, with Gilman’s poem “The Mother’s Charge,” in which a dying mother bombards her daughter with instructions for life that include such bits of wisdom as, “. . . don’t iron sitting down— / Wash your potatoes when the fat is brown—” and such random rules for living as, “Monday, unless it rains—it always pays / To get fall sewing done on the right days” (9–12). Carol Farley Kessler suggests that the “grim humor” of this piece, in which the mother’s mind comes across as hopelessly muddled, mixing “immediate directives—‘the starch is out,’ ‘we need more flour,’”—with general housekeeping tips regarding washing, ironing, cleaning, and gardening,” resembles that of E. M. Broner in *Her Mothers* (1975; rpt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). See Kessler 137–38 and Broner.

11. For a lucid discussion of Gilman’s criticisms of the home and suggestions for constructive change, see Dolores Hayden, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Influence.” Section V (chapters 9–12) of Hayden’s *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981): 181–309. See also Polly Wynn Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Architectural Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

12. This comment by Bombeck has been quoted over 300 times on the Internet, but the original source is unclear. See, for example: <http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/01/kyla/quotations/b.html>.

13. Quoted by Hill and Deegan in their introduction to Gilman, *The Dress of Women* xxii–xxiii.

14. Miller wrote, “1. BECAUSE pockets are not a natural right. / . . . 5. Because it would make dissension between husband and wife as to whose pockets were to be filled. / 6. Because it would destroy a man’s chivalry toward woman, if he did not have to carry all her things in his pockets” (*Are* 44).

15. See Nicole Hollander. For more on Hollander’s achievements as a feminist humorist, see Patricia Williams Alley, “Hokinson and Hollander: Female Cartoonists and American Culture,” *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991): 115–38.

16. See Mark Twain, “What Have the Police Been Doing?” *Territorial Enterprise*, 1866. *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays*, vol. 1, 1852–1890, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York: Library of America, 1992): 196–98; “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy,” *Galaxy*, 1870. Budd, vol. 1. 379–82; and “Only a ‘Nigger,’” *The Buffalo Express*, 1869, *Mark Twain at the Buffalo Express*, ed. Joseph B. McCullough and Janice McIntire-Strasburg (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999): 22–23.

17. See Paul Laurence Dunbar, “One Man’s Fortunes,” 1900. *Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings by Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David

Bradley (New York: Random House/Modern Library, 2005): 165–80.

18. Martha Campbell cartoon (Kaufman and Blakeley 76).

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